

STORIES OF THE BIRDS *FROM MYTH & FABLE*



By M. C. CAREY

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STORIES OF THE BIRDS
FROM MYTH AND FABLE



Fr.

THE PEACOCK

STORIES OF THE BIRDS FROM MYTH & FABLE

BY

M. C. CAREY

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"PRINCESS MARY" ETC.

WITH COLOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

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PREFACE

THE stories in this book have been gathered from many sources. Most of them were first told in the childhood of the world, when primitive man invented reasons for what he could not otherwise explain. He told his children "why the Robin had a red breast," "why the swallow's tail is forked," and so on. Often we can recognize the same stories in the folk-lore of different peoples, more or less changed according to the characters of the peoples who told and retold them long before the age when stories came to be printed in books. This is explained by the fact that the Aryan race, from which many modern nations sprang, brought with them the foundations of these legends when they migrated into Europe from Asia.

Sometimes we find a familiar legend in the folk-lore of races that have no affinity with our Aryan ancestors. For example, in the folk-lores of the Serbians and a tribe of West African negroes there is an interesting story in which a man is able to understand the language of birds and animals. The two tales are practically identical and the explanation most probably is that

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

the legend was carried south by Arabian merchants in the course of their trading.

The delightfully simple stories which I have retold tell us that children of all time have been deeply interested in our feathered friends. Our own children may be helped by them to a closer interest in the lives and habits of birds, and interest will quicken observation. As a picture of the same scene may be painted by many artists, each different yet each faithful in all essentials, so I have endeavoured in the same spirit to transmit to children of to-day the naïve imaginings of the Once-upon-a-Time.

I am particularly indebted to the following sources : *Folk-lore of the Holy Land*, by J. E. Hannauer ; *Myths and Legends of Japan*, by F. H. Davis ; *Fables and Folk Tales*, by W. W. Skeat ; *Folk-lore and Provincial Names of Birds*, by C. Swainson ; *Rumanian Bird and Beast Stories*, by M. Gaster ; *Indian Folk Tales*, by M. F. Nixon-Roulet ; *Birds of Omen in Shetland*, by J. Saxby ; *Korean Fairy Tales*, by Wm. Elliot Griffis ; and *Folk Tales from Austria and Bohemia*, by F. T. Vernalcken.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE UGLY LITTLE CROWS <i>Rumanian</i>	13
THE MAGPIE <i>Western</i>	16
HOW THE WREN BROUGHT FIRE TO EARTH <i>Breton</i>	21
THE WOODPECKER AND HER SACK <i>Rumanian</i>	25
HOW THE NIGHTINGALE GOT HIS BEAUTIFUL VOICE <i>Rumanian</i>	30
THE BOASTFUL PIGEON <i>Oriental</i>	35
THE SWALLOW AND HIS FORKED TAIL <i>Oriental</i>	38
FIVE LITTLE STORIES OF THE KINDLY ROBIN :	
1. THE EAR OF WHEAT <i>Breton</i>	44
2. THE STRAW IN THE VIRGIN'S EYE <i>Basque</i>	45
3. THE ROBIN AT THE CROSS <i>Breton</i>	46
4. THE ROBIN AND THE BEAR <i>Eskimo</i>	48
5. THE BOY WHO BECAME A ROBIN <i>Chippeway Indian</i>	50
THE GOOD-NATURED RAVEN <i>American Indian</i>	52
THE LARK'S ADVICE <i>Rumanian</i>	56
THE LAPWING'S SEARCH <i>Hindu</i>	62
TWO LITTLE STORIES OF THE SWALLOW :	
1. THE CHILDREN WHO WERE CHANGED INTO SWALLOWS <i>Eskimo</i>	65
2. HOLY SUNDAY <i>Rumanian</i>	66

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

	PAGE
WHY THE WAGTAIL WAGS HIS TAIL	<i>Rumanian</i> 68
THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE WORM	<i>French</i> 71
HOW THE WREN MADE A BID FOR THE CROWN	<i>Universal</i> 74
WHEN THE BLACKBIRD WAS WHITE	<i>French</i> 79
THE SPARROW AND THE WASHERWOMAN	<i>Japanese</i> 84
THE BULLFINCH WHO WAS ONCE A WICKED GROCER	<i>Rumanian</i> 88
WHY THE WOODPECKER LAUGHS AT FROGS	<i>Australian</i> 91
KING SOLOMON AND THE HOOPOES	<i>Oriental</i> 96
THE TAILS OF THE STORKS	<i>Rumanian</i> 99
UNDAN THE PELICAN	<i>Malayan</i> 108
THE ANCIENT SPARROW	<i>Rumanian</i> 112
THE OPTIMISTIC THRUSH	<i>Rumanian</i> 115
THE KINGFISHER	<i>German</i> 118
TWO LITTLE STORIES OF THE WOODPECKER:	
1. GERTRUDE AND THE CAKE	<i>Norse</i> 121
2. HOW THE WOODPECKER GOT HIS RED CREST	<i>American Indian</i> 123
THE CYNICAL HOOPOE	<i>Oriental</i> 127
THE TRUTHFUL PARROT	<i>American Indian</i> 131
THE KNIGHT AND THE NIGHTINGALE	<i>From the</i> "Gesta Romanorum" 135
THE GREEDY RAVEN	<i>Rumanian</i> 138
THE THIRSTY HERON	<i>Rumanian</i> 141

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE TAIL OF THE PEACOCK <i>Greek</i>	144
THE CONCEITED PARTRIDGE <i>Rumanian</i>	147
WHY THE CUCKOO HAS NO TIME TO BUILD HER NEST, AND WHY SHE FLIES SO HEAVILY <i>Breton</i>	149
THE CURLEW AND THE SAINT <i>Celtic</i>	151
THE SWALLOW WHO WAS ONCE A WICKED MOTHER-IN-LAW <i>Rumanian</i>	155
HOW THE LONG-EARED OWL CAME BY HIS NAME <i>English</i>	158
WINGED BURDENS <i>English</i>	162
WHY THE COCK CAN FLY NO HIGHER THAN THE STABLE DOOR <i>Japanese</i>	166
THE RESTLESS CUCKOOS <i>Rumanian</i>	168
THE UNGRATEFUL TOM-TIT <i>Rumanian</i>	173
WHY THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS BETTER THAN THE DOVE <i>Rumanian</i>	176
THE RAVEN WHO TRIED TO WALK LIKE THE DOVE <i>Rumanian</i>	179
THE MAGPIES AND THE RIVER OF STARS <i>Korean</i>	182
THE GRATEFUL SPARROWS <i>Korean</i>	187

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
THE PEACOCK	<i>Frontispiece</i>
THE MAGPIE	18
THE PIGEON	36
THE SWALLOW	66
THE BULLFINCH	88
THE WOODPECKER	124
THE RAVEN	138
THE COCK	166

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

THE UGLY LITTLE CROWS

WHEN the All-father had created the world and all living things, He gave to each of His creatures a special name, and He painted each a different colour. After some time had passed He decided to call the birds together, to see how they fared, and that He might give each one of them a gift.

His decree went out, and the feathered world received the message ; not only were the fathers and mothers of families to come to the meeting, but their young ones also, and the excitement and pleasure of all can be imagined.

Most of the birds were quiet and sober by nature, and only the Rooks, who lived together in a great colony, gossiped loudly about the invitation.

The Ravens, who are the heads of the Crow family, lived apart, feared by bird and beast—great birds with heavy beaks and sharp talons. They spoke little, but brooded on their lonely ledges ; none the less, they too were pleased at the summons.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Then there were the Crows themselves, the second branch of the big Crow family; also solitary by nature, but eager to show off their children on the great day. They even overcame their shyness, and joined their cheerful cousins, the Rooks, at many feeding-grounds, gathering all the news they might glean from the gossiping throng.

At last the appointed time arrived, and all the birds, with their families, assembled in the presence of the Creator. Then the All-father passed among them bestowing gifts, and welcoming His little ones. At last He came to a mother Crow and her little family of three, of whom she was vastly proud, who were sitting agape beside their parents.

They were extremely ugly, being indeed the ugliest of all the fledglings present, and the All-father paused in amazement before them.

"Surely these are not My creatures," He said slowly. "From whence do they come?" He continued, addressing Himself to the mother, who, arrayed in her glossy black and green feathers, was taken aback by this question.

"From whence *should* they come?" cried she. "They are my very lovely children," and she stroked each one lovingly with her black hooked beak.

"Go home, and bring Me another more beautiful

THE UGLY LITTLE CROWS

child," the Creator answered. "These are much too ugly," and He turned away.

The poor Crows were greatly distressed at this command, and while the father took his little family back to the solitary ledge on the cliff-side, the mother flew all over the world, seeking for a fledgling that was more beautiful than her own nestlings.

She travelled far and wide, peeping into every nest she came to, and looking closely at every bird, both great and small ; then at last she sadly returned home.

"What have you found, my dear?" asked her mate, making room for her on the ledge, and offering her food.

"There are no children more beautiful in the world than our own," she said, half proudly and half sadly. "I have been everywhere, over sea and land, and our fledglings are more lovely than all others I have seen. . . ."

At that moment the Creator appeared before them. He smiled upon the mother Crow, and said gently, "You have done well, and you are right and wise. No other child is so beautiful as her own in a mother's eyes. Blessed be the little Crows from this time forth." Then, presenting them with gifts, the Creator left them.

THE MAGPIE

MANY hundreds of years ago there were ever so many more trees than there are now, and birds did not need to hide their eggs away so carefully from horrid boys who steal their babes before they are hatched.

Be that as it may, one day the birds held a solemn meeting to talk over the subject of nest-building.

"First of all, what is the good of a nest?" asked the Oyster-catcher.

"Your eggs are so like stones that half the time you don't know what you're sitting on," returned the Woodpecker, who is famous for her pure white eggs.

"I like to get away from draughts," said a Wren. "In fact, I'd like to have a lot of nests to choose from, and what's more, I should have if I only knew how to set about it."

"One's enough for me," remarked a Rook. "Think of the *time* it would take."

"I'm all against nests myself," said the Cuckoo. "But, of course, there's no reason why *you* shouldn't have them, and even let them out as lodgings."

THE MAGPIE

"Hear, hear," echoed the Wryneck, who always applauded any remark the Cuckoo made.

"Come on, let's start to build," cried an energetic Tit, and began to collect lichen and moss in a most excited way.

The other birds set about following the example, and very soon piles of sticks and moss, and leaves and bits of paper and string were to be seen in every direction. But these would not hold together; they fell through the leafy branches as fast as they were put in place.

Hot and cross, the feathered workers met again in the cool of the evening.

"*What* a day," sighed the Thrush. "I'm quite exhausted."

"This sort of thing is not in my line at all," grumbled a haughty Blackbird, polishing his golden beak.

"Nor mine," "Nor mine," was echoed all round.

"*Ha ha ! ha, ha, HA !*" chuckled a voice over their heads.

It was a Magpie, the only bird who knew how to build a nest; she had stolen the idea from Man, just as she would steal anything she could lay her beak upon.

She was the last creature to whom the other birds would have gone for advice, but they were not rude

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

enough to refuse to listen to her, hairy head or no hairy head,¹ if she had anything to say.

“Let me show you how to build a nest,” she went on, glancing at the litter on the ground. “I see you have collected a good deal of stuff.” Too tired to do anything else, the other birds sat round in a ring and watched the Magpie’s efforts.

First she flew to the edge of the little stream near by and brought back tiny morsels of wet clay in her beak, until she had collected a sort of ball. She hollowed out the centre of this and smoothed it outside until it looked like a half of an empty coconut shell. This finished, the Thrush, who was most impatient, became so excited that she flew up crying, “I see, I see,” and went off at a great pace to commence upon a nest of her own. She should have stayed to see what the Magpie did next; she would have learned more about nest-building. As it is, she has not got far beyond the mud stage, although she has since taken a few hints from the Blackbird.

The Magpie paid no attention to the interruption, and went on with her lesson. She picked out some well-shaped twigs and nice strong grass, and wove these into a lining for the inside of the mud ball.

“Good, good,” cried the Blackbird. “Now I under-

¹ The Bretons say that on a Magpie’s head grow seven of Satan’s hairs.



THE MAGPIE

THE MAGPIE

stand," and anxious lest the Thrush should get too far ahead of him he too flew off, and that is why he builds his nest something like that to-day.

The Magpie now brought some moss and bits of wool, some lichen and string-like roots, and worked these into the lining until she had made a very firm nest indeed. Then off flew the Chaffinch, in a great hurry to start building ; she has certainly profited well by the little she learned.

Now came the top lining, and the Magpie proceeded to make lovely soft cushions of hair and feathers. The Robin flew off before she had finished, lest he should forget what he had seen.

One by one the birds disappeared, but the Magpie went on with her work, paying no heed to the flight of those who did not wait to learn the whole of her secret.

Among the few who remained longest were the Longtailed Tit and the Chiff-chaff and they were rewarded by learning a good deal about roofing.

In the end only the Wood-pigeon was left, cooing to herself in a neighbouring tree, " Take two, do, Taffy ; take two, do, Taffy."

The Magpie heard this at last, and without looking up said, as she picked up a twig :

" No, one's enough."

But the Pigeon was thinking of worms and acorns and went on in her homely way, " Take two, *do*,

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Taffy," without paying any attention to the Magpie. Indeed, she had not watched at all, and this is why her nest to-day is such a simple one.

The Magpie was offended. "Take two? Take two?" she cried. "What nonsense!" and then she looked up and saw only the Wood-pigeon talking to herself. No other bird was in sight.

"Well," she declared, "I'll never show them anything again," and off she flew to the village, where she stole a number of things to ease her ruffled feelings.

And the reason why so few birds can roof in their nests to this day is that they did not stay to the end of the Magpie's lesson.

HOW THE WREN BROUGHT FIRE TO EARTH

THIS is a tale about the brown Wren, who at the very beginning had lovely feathers and quite a long tail. He acted as a servant of the gods and was kept busy by great Jupiter and Minerva, carrying messages to the plants and animals on earth.

It was the Wren who told the Dandelion when she might let her clock run down, and taught the Swallows how to follow the sun ; it was he who warned the Pimpernels that rain was coming so that they could shut their windows ; it was he who kept the Squirrels out of mischief.

But you will want to hear the story.

Long before the days of chimney-pots there was a time, which no one living can remember, when no spark of fire showed upon the earth, and there were no homes.

Men used to roam from place to place trying to keep warm, and living on nuts and fruit and uncooked roots, for they could not bake without a fire. And

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

what is life without a home fire as centre of the family circle ?

It happened on one particular day in winter that the biting cold was more intense than usual. Men grouped themselves together under shelters of logs and branches, and the birds huddled up miserably on the boughs of the windswept trees.

A cry rose from the whole earth—a prayer to heaven for the one little vital spark of fire that would make life worth living.

But if the gods should take pity upon the earth-dwellers, who would fetch the flame? Many birds had great wings, and the Storks with their red legs were the messengers of the Fire-god, as also the red-throated Swallow. But these did not come forward. It was left to one of the tiniest of birds, the little brown Wren, to offer help. Although so small he had a big heart and was willing to start at once on the perilous journey. Pausing for a moment to ruffle out his feathers, he darted upward and disappeared without a sound.

The earth seemed to stop breathing, for none moved or spoke. A deep mantle of snow made the silence more profound. Every eye turned toward the west, whither the Wren had flown and where the faint edge of a winter sun could be seen above a gold-tipped cloud. In a moment, however,

HOW THE WREN BROUGHT FIRE

the gleam had vanished and darkness was over all.

But still, hoping against hope, the helpless earth-dwellers kept their gaze fixed upon the sky, and at last, oh joy ! a tiny spot of light was seen which grew brighter with every passing moment. It was the Wren. Nearer and nearer he came, staggering in his short flights, until a spark of flame could be seen glowing in the darkness—a beacon of hope to the watchers below.

But soon hope changed to pity, and pity to grief, for they saw that the feathers of the Wren were burnt off, even to the down, his heart was barely pulsing, his wings feebly beating.

As he dropped to earth, the birds gathered round him, and while Man tended the precious flame, each bird gave of his best to restore the little sufferer to life and strength. Each plucked a feather from his breast, and with these the Wren was soon warm and snug again ; his little body was quite covered, but, alas ! he had now only the smallest of tails.

The reason for this, as you will learn, was the jealousy of the Owl, who stood outside the circle, angry that he should now share the Fire-god's favour with another, for he too was famed as a fire-bringer. He had been too lazy to offer to fetch the fire himself, but now that another had done so he was jealous.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Not a feather did he give to the Wren, and that is one of the reasons why these little birds have no tail to speak of to this day. It also explains why the Owl is chased by other birds whenever he comes out into the daylight, for they still remember his unkindness. As a rule he flies silently at night, and so avoids others ; he leads a very lonely life.

The earth-dwellers never let the spark of fire die out. On the day that it was brought by the Wren little homes were started, and ever since families have gathered round their hearths in winter. To this day the Wren cocks his tiny tail and builds his nests in the ivy close up against their chimneys.

THE WOODPECKER AND HER SACK

IN the days when the All-father walked upon the earth and watched over His creatures as He wandered, the Woodpecker was not a bird, but an old woman. She was not a very nice person either ; she had an immensely long nose, which she poked into everybody's business ! Her bonnet, and the nose that stuck out of it became the terror of the countryside ; to this day you will hear people talk of ' poke bonnets,' which used to mean that old woman's bonnet, and none other.

As she sniffed and prowled about, always inquisitive and spiteful, she finally made friends with the Swallows, who, as every one knows, are fond of listening to secrets. For this purpose they build their nests on houses, hidden away under the eaves so that no one shall see them. We call this ' eavesdropping ' now, and forget that the word used only to be applied to the Swallows.

One day the All-father came upon the old woman, who was busily making trouble as usual, and sad

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

indeed was He to see her. He took a huge sack and went into the woods and fields, and invited all kinds of Beetles and Ants, Flies and Mosquitos, Gnats and Grubs, Spiders and Caterpillars, to get inside it. And as they never refused anything the Creator asked of them, they all rushed in helter-skelter.

When it was full the All-father tied up the mouth very tightly, and carried the sack to the old woman.

He found her outside a newly married Flycatcher's nest, evidently listening with all her ears.

"Here is a sack for thee," the Creator said to her. "It is filled with a great treasure. Carry it now to thine house, but remember, if thou openest it on thy way home it will bring thee much grief and sorrow. If thou puttest into it so much as the tip of thy nose, or if thou makest but the smallest pinprick of a hole, more troubles than thou hast ever caused—and they are many—will come upon thee."

So saying He left her.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the hag, looking after Him. "The will of the All-father is law indeed to me. I will be careful," and she raised the sack to her shoulder, and hobbled off across the field with it, as fast as she could go.

All went well for a time, but after a short half-mile the old woman's fingers began to itch to open the sack,

THE WOODPECKER AND HER SACK

and her nose to sniff with greed and curiosity. What *could* be inside that was so precious ?

At last she could not bear to wait longer, and in spite of the warning she had received she put the sack on the ground at the edge of a wood and sat down beside it. She tried to get the tiniest glimpse through the mouth of it, but it was much too tightly tied ; then she turned the sack over to find even a pinprick, but the canvas was perfectly sound. Finally she took a long hatpin out of her bonnet, and began to make a little round hole at the very bottom.

Her red bonnet fell off as she did so, and her wispy grey hair was blown about in the wind, so that she looked more like a witch than ever.

Suddenly a squealing and a buzzing and a squeaking began inside the sack ! As the hole grew larger under the old woman's skinny and impatient fingers, out came the Flies and the Gnats, the Beetles and the Caterpillars, the Ants and the Spiders—away, away, scrambling, flying, wriggling, crawling—away into the air, and through the long grass into the wood.

Faster, faster they flew, away from the stuffy sack and the foolish old woman, and in the shake of a feather hardly one was to be seen.

The old woman was in a terrible fright ; she tried to scoop the insects into her bonnet, and she succeeded in catching one or two of the slowest Grasshoppers

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

and Beetles before all had quite disappeared. The sack was empty, and by the time she reached home the Grasshoppers and the Beetles that she had put back had crawled out of the hole again and had vanished.

Then the voice of the Creator came to her, asking what she had done, and how she had kept her promise.

The old woman stammered and stuttered, but could not say a word; she looked hurriedly to see if there was not *one* Beetle, but the sack was perfectly empty.

Then the All-father came and looked at it, and saw the tell-tale hole made by the hatpin.

"Of what avail are thy promises?" He asked, in a reproachful voice. "Thy curiosity hath been thine undoing; thou shalt be changed into a bird, and seek ever for these insects thou hast lost, until thy sack be full again. Only then shalt thou become a human being once more."

And so, in less time than it takes to clean a beak, the old woman was turned into a Woodpecker; her long nose became a hard beak, her bonnet a red patch on her head, her hatpins strong, sharp claws with which she can run up the trunks of trees. Now all day long she thrusts her beak into the bark and into cracks of branches, tapping as she goes, in order to

THE WOODPECKER AND HER SACK

fill the sack with Ants and other insects that run out at the sound of her tapping.

But just as her curiosity made her unable to resist her desire to peep into the sack, so her hunger makes her unable to refrain from eating the insects when she catches them, wherefore the sack is no fuller now than when it was so foolishly emptied.

HOW THE NIGHTINGALE GOT HIS BEAUTIFUL VOICE

WE are all bidden to the presence of the Creator," said a Thrush to a Blackbird, in an awed tone.

"By name?" inquired the other anxiously.

"Yes," said the Thrush. "The Jays are reading out the names; listen! you can hear for yourself."

From over the tree-tops in the valley could be heard the shrill voices of the Jays, as they flew from tree to tree carrying the news. The birds had only recently been given names, and they were doubly excited at hearing them called out for the first time.

The Blackbird thanked the Thrush for telling him, and flew off to his mate; they then joined the eager throng which had set out for the trysting-place.

On the way there was much discussion of recent events.

"It's all very well to have given me a name," said the Greenfinch, "but as I'm exactly the same colour as my cousin the Yellowhammer, what is the use of

THE NIGHTINGALE'S VOICE

it? You may be *called* Blue," he added to a Marsh Tit, "but——"

"I'm not called Blue," cried the other snappily. "*He's* a Blue Tit, not me."

The Greenfinch jerked his tail, much as a man would shrug his shoulders. "There you are," he said, in the tone of one who does not wish to argue.

The flight ended, the birds alighted in the presence of the Creator, and were awed into silence as He spoke and told them that the time had now come when each bird should have a different colour, shade, or marking, and that He was going to paint each one that very day out of His wonderful paint-box. A twittering of excitement filled the air, and then silence reigned again as the proceedings commenced.

Can you imagine the scene? First, thousands of birds of all kinds—each with a beauty of form and plumage, but all of the same sombre colour, without the smallest shade of difference between one feather and another.

Then the gradual change as each bird passed under the Creator's brush—the rainbow tints of the Peacock; the flaming hues of the Bird of Paradise; the glowing colours of the Cock Pheasant; the varying shades of the Jay and the little Robin, the rust-red Kestrel, and the snowy Seagull. One and all came in for a share of the Creator's skill, as the world was

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

enriched with living jewels that flashed and gleamed in the sun.

As each bird received its special gift, it returned to its home, and the Blackbird—now a glossy black with a golden beak—flew exulting through the far woods.

As he neared his nest he espied a little drab brown bird hopping about beneath him, who gazed at him one moment in alarm, then darted into a bush. The Blackbird peered in after him.

“Come out, friend,” he cried. “It is I, the Blackbird. Look at my wonderful feathers and let me look at yours.”

The little Nightingale crept out, and was lost in admiration. He appeared very small and poor in his dull garb.

“Where *have* you been?” he asked at last, after scanning the Blackbird from every side.

It was now his turn to look surprised. “Where have I been?” he repeated. “Why, the Creator has just given each one of us a colour, either to suit our name or to distinguish us from others. You should just see some of the birds! They are like the rainbow, or like the fire; some of the little ones have patches of the blue sky on their wings. But did you not know?”

“I have not heard a word of all this,” said the poor Nightingale. “I have been at home all day. Oh,

THE NIGHTINGALE'S VOICE

Blackbird, do you think I should be too late if I went now ? ”

“ Fly, fly,” he urged. “ Fly straight through the wood and on to the trysting-place. Do not delay a moment ! How came it that you did not hear the calling of the Jays ? ”

There was no reply, for like a flash the Nightingale had risen into the upper air, and so swift was his flight that he soon reached the place where the Creator sat well pleased with His handiwork, and alone.

“ Who are you, little creature ? ” He asked.

“ I am your Nightingale,” he cried. “ All-father, is there no colour left for me ? I did not hear the summons. Ah, do not say I am too late.”

The Creator looked at His brush and then at His heavenly palette. Both were empty of colour and dry, and He sighed.

“ Alas, my little one,” He said, stroking the brown feathers, “ I have no more colour on my brush. See,” and He held it up for the Nightingale to see, and no drops fell from it. The poor bird could not hide his distress, and the Creator was touched.

“ Listen, little one,” He said, bending low. “ Even if you cannot be loved for your colour, I will touch your tongue, and make it golden ; by that shall men know you for yourself.”

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Then He brushed the bird's tongue lightly with the very tip of His brush, and as He did so a shaft of light from the dying sun lit up the scene, and tinged it with sunset splendour.

And the Creator listened and smiled while the little brown bird burst into a wondrous song of gratitude. As the evening shadows fall, his liquid notes sound through the trees, and the earth is hushed to hear them. "Hark, it is the Nightingale," men say, and marvel.

THE BOASTFUL PIGEON¹

SOLOMON was walking in his palace gardens in the cool of the day. A fountain played near by, and a soft breeze that came up from the river hardly stirred the heavy branches of the cedars.

The King was troubled as he paced the paths under the trees, listening to the songs of the birds, and trying to solve a problem that was vexing his mind. He had had a difference of opinion with one of his wives, and in what manner ought he to deal with her?

Now Solomon was wisest of all kings; he even understood the language of birds and beasts. Thus, as he walked in the shade, the conversation of two Pigeons high up in the dark branches of a giant cedar attracted his attention.

They were billing and cooing after the usual manner of Wood-pigeons when suddenly the King heard the cock-bird say in a boastful tone: "After all, my love,

¹ Compare with the same legend in the story, "The Butterfly that Stamped," by Rudyard Kipling. It occurs in *Folk-lore of the Holy Land*, by J. E. Hannauer.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

who is this Solomon? And what are his palaces? If I cared I could level them all as flat as that garden path with one blow of my foot!"

The King was amused at this absurd show of vanity on the part of the Pigeon.

"Come down, O Pigeon," he called. And when the vain bird appeared in answer to the royal summons, Solomon asked: "Why do you tell such lies, you little rascal? Do you think anyone is likely to believe one word that you utter, if you brag in such a foolish fashion?"

But the Pigeon cocked his grey head on one side, and answered pertly: "Forgive me, Your Majesty. You cannot have been aware that I was speaking to my female of a wife! I am sure you will agree that we males must take a strong line, and speak up before our mates if we are to preserve our dignity."

Solomon was much amused at this reply, and laughed a trifle ruefully as he thought of his own problems. So he waved his bejewelled hand and sent the Pigeon back to its mate, making him promise not to be so foolish in future.

When the Cock reached the branch on which his wife was anxiously awaiting him, she sidled along in an excited state to hear what had happened.

"Why did the King send for you, my wonderful warbler?" she asked, trying to put her mate in a



THE PIGEON

THE BOASTFUL PIGEON

good temper by flattering words, as was her way when her husband was ruffled.

The Cock-pigeon laughed carelessly, as he preened himself in her seemingly adoring gaze.

“Oh, he was in rather a fright,” said he. “He heard what I said to you about the palaces and asked me not to kick them down. I said I would at any rate leave them alone for the present, as a favour to him.”

His wife gazed at her lord admiringly.

Now King Solomon had stayed under the tree and he was so enraged at the Wood-pigeon's conceit, that without more ado he turned both birds into stone as a warning to men that they should not boast to their wives, and to women that they should not encourage them to do so.

THE SWALLOW AND HIS FORKED TAIL

ONCE upon a time there lived a very touchy Mosquito.

He was one of those fussy, shrill-voiced scandal lovers who delight in shrieking unpleasant things into your ear.

He was never in the same place for more than two minutes, and was altogether a most disturbing person.

Now at the same time there also lived a Serpent, who had a spectacle mark on the back of his head, or an "eye without a hook" as the Mosquito would shrill in his ear when he wished to be more than usually rude.

This remark always annoyed the Serpent, and he would dart out his tongue at the Mosquito, perhaps to show how clever it was to have a forked tongue.

But all this has nothing to do with the Swallow, you may say.

It hasn't much, except the forked part of the story. Have you ever noticed a Swallow's tail? That is forked too, but in the days when the talkative Mosquito

THE SWALLOW AND HIS FORKED TAIL

spread scandal the Swallow had an ordinary tail like a Thrush or a Blackbird.

This is the story.

One day, the King of all the animals and birds bade the Jays carry a message to his subjects. It was the Jays who were sent, because when they call there is dead silence in the woods ; every creature takes cover and all can hear.

The King's message was to the effect that all were to meet him at cock-crow in the very middle of the wood, as he had something to say, and that Court dress was to be worn. By this all knew that it would be quite safe to go, for there can be no squabbles at Court.

Next morning the little and big paths through the wood were crowded with the folk going to Court.

The birds flew through and over the trees, so as to get there first, and the Monkeys flung themselves from branch to branch, pelting some of the less agile folk with nuts as they went.

Molly Cottontail, the Rabbit, and her fluffy family were there, and a Stoat in a white waistcoat, brand new for the occasion, saw, in the most gentlemanly way possible, that the little ones didn't straggle behind.

Ducks and Chickens, Cocks and Hens, Rats, Mice, Squirrels and Badgers all jostled along together, while the Elephants and Tigers gave some of the smaller ones rides on their backs.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Then the biggest Cock crew, and the ceremony began.

"Welcome," began the King, and every creature cheered his loudest.

"I have asked you to come here this morning," went on the King, "because I believe some of you are always grumbling. Tell me your complaints and what you think I should do about them?"

Then he sat down.

Nobody spoke for a few minutes, until the Magpie, always a most forward creature, hopped to the front, bowing in his black and white dress.

"My tail is too long, sire," he chattered. "In a gale of wind, I cannot steer straight."

Rather a rude way to talk to a King, but Magpies always *are* rude, and you may notice that his tail is just as long as ever to-day.

"Next, please," said the King.

"Your Majesty," grunted a Pig. "Men keep me in a sty for their own convenience, and yet never seem to think I want to be as clean as they are. Why should I be treated so badly?"

"I like honey," said a lumbering old Bear. "Why should Bees sting me?"

"I like Men," said the Robin. "Why do they take my eggs?"

After a long procession of similar complaints Man rose up, and cried, "King, live for ever! The Serpent

THE SWALLOW AND HIS FORKED TAIL

with the double tongue ever seeks my blood ! Can he not be made to prefer some other ? ”

All the animals were very cross at hearing Man's request ; they were jealous of him and would have been angry at whatever he had asked. But the King nodded to the Jay, at whose cry, as usual, all became silent.

“ O Man,” said the King, “ I will see what can be done for you, the chief of my subjects. Nevertheless, the Serpent must be fed. You, O Mosquito, who think you know so much, and travel so far, find out for me whose blood is best for the Serpent.”

Then turning to the silent throng, he commanded that in a year all but ten minutes they should gather again to hear his decree.

So the animals and birds bowed low, and departed to their homes. All but the Mosquito ; he lost no time in starting upon his quest, and buzzing away, bit every creature he met to find out whose blood was best for his friend the Serpent.

One night, he met the Swallow.

“ Good evening, Swallow,” he called, just to prevent ill feeling.

“ Good evening, 'Quito,” piped the bird. “ How goes the quest ? ” And he darted down to catch a fly so close to the Mosquito that the latter had a great fright.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

"The blood of Man is best," he stuttered at last.

"Oho," said the Swallow, missing the insect again by a hair's breadth.

Now the Swallow is a friend of Man, and builds under the eaves of his houses and inside his porches.

Hovering above the Mosquito he asked again, "*Whose* blood did you say?"

"Man's," buzzed the Mosquito. "Nasty pest—his is best——" and with a malicious chuckle, he made to fly off. But he was not quick enough for the Swallow.

Like a flash the loyal bird was upon him, and with the cry of, "*This* is better," tore out the Mosquito's tongue, and swallowed it.

At that moment the Jay sounded his call. Lo! the year was nearly up, and the animals were hurrying to the King.

"Whose blood is best for the Serpent?" demanded the King, when his subjects had grouped themselves around him.

The unfortunate Mosquito could only answer—*Ssszzz ssszz . . .!* He couldn't say—"The blood of Man," as he meant to do.

"What's that you say?" said the King sharply.

"*Ssszzzsssss!*" buzzed the insect in a fury.

Everybody looked at his neighbour in amazement.

Then the Swallow flew down, and said, "O King,

THE SWALLOW AND HIS FORKED TAIL

the Mosquito seems to have lost his tongue for the moment. When I met him just now he told me of his discovery. It is the blood of a Frog that the Serpent likes best."

"Thank you, little bird," said the King. "The Serpent shall not seek the blood of Man any longer."

"Zszszsssss . . ." hissed the Mosquito as he flew off in a passion of rage ; and his spite against Man is so great that he bites him to this day.

Now the Serpent was furious too, for he liked Man's warm blood much better than the blood of the chilly Frog.

He sneaked from the gathering, coiled himself up, and lay back his head and waited. Soon the Swallow, flying from the audience, darted down close to where he lay in hiding. This was a golden opportunity ; he struck out like the lash of a whip, but just missed ! Only just, for he tore away a great mouthful of tail-feathers as the bird flew on.

And this is why the Swallow's tail is forked. We can still see where the feathers were torn out, and Man loves his bird friend the more for this mark of his loyalty.

FIVE LITTLE STORIES OF THE KINDLY ROBIN

THE EAR OF WHEAT

WHEN in ages past some pious monks came to settle in Brittany and the peasants round them were yet heathen, they gathered stones from the river bed and built a rough dwelling together with a chapel in which to raise their altar.

Time came when they must sow seed to bring forth harvest, and the monks set to work to till the fields, and prepare them for their food.

Then to their dismay they found they had no wheat seed.

The Brothers went on working, but their hearts were heavy. They could not live on roots and fruit and flesh only ; bread they must have. But late one summer evening a Brother lingered in the fields, his frock rolled round his waist so that he worked the freer. Leaning on his spade he watched the sun set in the west, its light glowing across the plain and touching the trees with gold.

THE KINDLY ROBIN

As he mused, a little twitter caught his ear, and looking up he saw a Robin sitting on a twig near by, a long straw in his beak.

The monk looked closely, and his heart leaped when he saw that it was an ear of wheat, fat and yellow with the bursting grain.

"*Grâce à Dieu !*" the pious man cried, amazed at this good fortune, and on the words the bird let fall his burden and flew away.

The Brother carried home the ear with care, and the precious seeds were sown in the furrows that had been so carefully prepared.

In due time a little patch of wheat appeared and ripened ; again the seeds were sown, and year by year the fields grew more wide, until they spread at last across the plains.

To-day the stranger who remarks upon the fields of golden wheat in Brittany is told that all this wealth came from Robin's kindly gift.

THE STRAW IN THE VIRGIN'S EYE

As Mary trod the road from Nazareth one day a tiny straw was blown into her eyes.

A Robin from a bush near by saw her tears fall and flew to the Swallow for help. Then having filled his beak with water from a stream he returned with his

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

friend and the two birds alighted upon the Virgin's shoulder.

Then they fluttered to her face, and as the Robin dropped the water into the injured eye the Swallow gently passed his long tail-feathers beneath the lid, and so removed the straw.

Mary thanked the birds, and from that time the Swallow built his nest close to her door, while the Robin hopped around and was fed by the crumbs thrown to him by the little Jesus.

The Robin never left the Holy Sepulchre during those three long days of the first Easter, and on the first Ascension-day he joined in the Angels' songs.

Since then no wanton boy disturbs her nest ;
Weasel or wild-cat will her young molest ;
All sacred deem the bird of ruddy breast.

In Scotland it used to be thought that the Robin had a drop of the Saviour's blood in its veins, therefore to harm it was a sin.

THE ROBIN AT THE CROSS

Remembering how Jesus as a Child had shown love for all His Father's creatures, the Robin followed Him along the stony way that led to Calvary, flying from bush to bush as the great crowds surged up the hillside.

THE KINDLY ROBIN

At last the little bird took courage when the cruel nails had been fixed and fluttered timidly to the Cross ; with his tiny wings he wiped away the tears from Jesus' face, and with his beak struggled to pluck out the thorns that scarred His forehead.

As he strove drops of blood fell on his feathers and stained his breast with the scarlet hue we see to-day.

Now, perched beside him on the Cross there sat a Magpie, who in those days was more wonderfully feathered than any other bird. His feathers were all colours of the rainbow ; he had a great crest on his head, and his tail was as beautiful as the Peacock's. But his heart was evil, and as much as the Robin tried to ease the Sufferer's pain, so did he mock the Redeemer.

At last Jesus spoke : " Blessed be thou, my little brother ; thou who sharest in my sorrows. Happiness and protection shall be thy lot, and from this time shalt thou be known even as the Bird of God who bears good news of friendliness to men. But thee, O Magpie, thee I cannot bless. No longer shalt thou pride thyself upon thy crested head and brilliant plumes, for thou art not worthy of such beauty. From henceforth thy feathers shall be dark and sad, and thy life a hard one. Thou shalt build thy nest in the tops of trees where storms shall buffet thee."

And so it came to pass. The Robin is beloved of

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Men, the Magpie is hated by all. For he preys upon the young and the eggs of other birds ; his feathers are black, his nest is rocked by the tempest in the very tops of trees.

There is another legend which says that after the Crucifixion the Magpie did not go into mourning like the other birds. Her punishment is therefore that she must hang herself nine times from a branch before she can lay an egg !

THE ROBIN AND THE BEAR

In the days long since forgotten there was no fire on earth, except a flame that burned in the North, and which was precious to Men beyond measure because of the power which it gave them over all created things, and because its warmth gave happiness.

A very aged man tended this fire, and with his little son fed it both night and day and kept it glowing like a beacon on the hills amid ice and snow.

Now, there lived on those mountains a huge white Bear, who never ceased from watching the old man and the boy, for it was his design to put out the fire and so become master of the Northland.

Never a chance offered itself, however, for all his watchfulness, until one day the man fell ill and only

THE KINDLY ROBIN

the child was left to tend the fire and gather wood to burn.

The boy worked manfully, nursing his father day and night and keeping up the fire to warm the world, until he grew so weary that he fell asleep by the glowing flame and the fuel piled high around him.

The White Bear laughed.

Cunningly he approached ; with his huge wet paws he trampled on the embers and put out the fire, as he thought. Then, chuckling to himself, he rolled away, feeling secure at last and certain of his kingdom.

But a little bird had seen him. It was a brown Robin who now flew down to the ashes.

He turned over the black embers with his beak ; he scratched and searched till he found at last a tiny spark and one big ember with a fast-fading ruddy side.

Fetching some twigs and one or two dry leaves he fanned the weak glow into a little flame, then into a blaze, and when the boy at last awoke he found a bright fire burning, and a little bird with breast burned red.

Afar the Bear was growling in his den, and the sound echoed among the hills like rumbling thunder. Never could he be master of the cold Northland. Ever since those days the Robin has been loved by all children for the brave part which he played.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

THE BOY WHO BECAME A ROBIN

The Chippeway Indians give a very good reason why the Robin is so friendly to Man. They say that once upon a time there lived a hunter in the wild forests of North America. So ambitious was he that he determined that his only son should surpass the sons of all the other 'braves' in endurance and strength.

The boy at last reached the age when every Indian lad undergoes a long fast as part of the ceremony of choosing his Guardian Spirit, much as in the days of chivalry in the Old World a youth, on the eve of being made a Knight, knelt alone in prayer through the night before the altar of his faith in a dim chapel.

For eight days the boy had refused all food, and his father visited him in the little lodge where he sat apart, rejoicing in his son's strong will and strength of body. The test was enough, but because of his pride, the proud hunter urged the boy to fast yet another day so that he might outlast all his comrades.

The night passed, and when the dawn began to break the father repented of his selfish wish and hurried through the forest to the lodge. As he reached the entrance a little Robin flew out ; his son was dead, and his brave spirit had passed into the form of a bird.

The Robin perched on a branch above the stricken man and entreated him to stay his tears. " Do not

THE KINDLY ROBIN

grieve for me," he piped, " I shall be happier than as a man, however bold and strong. I shall always be the friend of Man and live near his lodges. Though I could not gratify your pride, my father, and become a mighty ' brave,' I will for ever cheer you with my song."

THE GOOD-NATURED RAVEN

ONCE upon a time there lived in far-off Indian lands a Grey Raven whose name was Yelth. He was a very nice bird indeed, most kind-hearted, and he wished well to all men, so that they came lovingly to regard him as the Spirit of Good.

But Grey Eagle, his uncle, was different ; in his hatred of mankind he had stolen and hidden away in his lodge the things that men most valued—the Sun, Moon, and Stars, and even Fire and Fresh Water. Grey Eagle was therefore detested as the Spirit of Evil, and he hated Yelth for his goodness of heart and because men loved him.

But Grey Eagle had a daughter, and she did not hate Yelth. On the contrary, she was attracted by his glossy grey feathers and deep voice, and whenever he cawed sweetly to her she would lift the lodge flap and bid him enter. But she was careful to do this only when her father was away hunting.

One day when Yelth was visiting the lodge and his cousin was getting him some tea, it occurred to him to look round and see if he could take away with him

THE GOOD-NATURED RAVEN

anything that would be of use to Man. Yelth did not mean to steal, he thought only of the service to his friends. It had not entered his head that Grey Eagle had perhaps hidden things in his lodge from an evil motive ; in fact, he was convinced that the bird would gladly join with him in making gifts to men.

So Yelth hopped about peering into dark corners, till suddenly he spied a shining ball.

"Who are you?" he croaked, drawing closer and trying with his claw to roll out the beautiful object.

"I am the Sun," answered the ball. "It is my nature to give out light and warmth, but here I am stifled. Why am I so cruelly shut up? Why may I not be of use to the world?"

"I can't imagine," said Yelth, very puzzled. "There must be some mistake. It is very odd indeed to find you here doing nothing ; I know a lot of people who would like very much to see you. And who are *you*?" he added, turning to a smaller ball which had just rolled up upon hearing the voices.

"I am the Moon," cried the new-comer in a little silvery voice. "In my dark corner here I have no light at all ; I am hidden from my friend the Sun, so cannot borrow light from him. Look at these little twinkly fellows. They are my sons the Stars, the flowers of the sky. Alas! they cannot bloom, for

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

the gardens of the world are shut to them ; we cannot get out of this prison."

Yelth was very upset at seeing these unwilling prisoners, and when he found Fire and Water hidden away too he told Grey Eagle's daughter that he must take them all away for Man. She was at first very fearful of her father's anger, but she could not long resist her lover, and she helped him place the prisoners in paper bags and hang them round his neck. This done, Yelth flew out of the lodge through the smoke hole in the roof, and away skyward with his treasures.

First he hung up the Sun in the blue sky, and it soon burst through its bag and shone gloriously on earth. Man looked up as he felt the kindly warmth and saw the bright light and said, " This must be Yelth's doing." He loved the Grey Raven all the more for this great service.

Then the Raven retired to a shady tree and waited till nightfall. He was very pleased at the gratitude of Man, and to see how all gathered round to thank him. Finally the Sun went to sleep and darkness fell again upon the earth.

The time had now come for Yelth to go home, but as he could not see the way he took the Moon from out of another bag and hung *her* up in the sky ; then so as to be able to fly yet more quickly he scattered the Stars around her. This done he started off to his lodge.

THE GOOD-NATURED RAVEN

Poor Yelth was in great need of rest. He had carried the Sun and the Moon and the Stars for a long time, and was now so tired that he let fall the Water as he flew. It flowed into lakes and rivers and springs and gave drink to the parched land ; it was one of the most welcome of gifts.

Yelth struggled on with his last burden, the Fire Stick, which he carried in his great beak. It smouldered and burned and smoke settled upon his grey feathers until they became as black as coal. At last the Fire Stick burned down to his beak, and dropping it amidst trees and rocks he flew on unburdened.

Men saw the Fire and discovered how to call it to life by rubbing two stones or two sticks together ; they have been grateful to Yelth ever since.

Grey Eagle was angry when he discovered what Yelth had done. He tried to fly right into the heart of the Sun to bring him back, but he was burnt to a cinder in the fierce rays.

Then Yelth married his daughter and the two have lived happily through all the years ; but their sons and daughters are born black as soot down to this very day.

THE LARK'S ADVICE

ONCE upon a time there lived a man not far from the banks of the great River Danube. He was a farmer, and daily ploughed or sowed or reaped his fields, according to the season of the year.

Many men would have been happy living this quiet and peaceful existence alone with the sun and wind all day long, listening to the singing of birds and watching the rain freshen the crops, but this man was not at all happy. He had a shrewish wife at home, and the beauties of nature were lost upon him when he thought of her sharp tongue waiting for him every evening.

One day in spring he was ploughing a field. The sky was a soft pale blue, and the air was pleasantly warm from the sun, which was high in the heavens, but the man never took his eyes off the line of the furrow he was ploughing, partly because he would not go straight if he did, and partly because he was brooding over his troubles.

In one corner of the field a little Lark had made her nest ; hidden under a tussock of grass, she had hatched

THE LARK'S ADVICE

her five white eggs, and the nestlings were now nearly fledged. Her mate was singing overhead in the spring sunshine, when suddenly he dropped mute at her side. He had seen the great plough and its team of oxen slowly but surely approaching, and came to bring warning.

The sharp blades were turning up the furrows in huge slabs, and there was no hope for fur or feather that should come in their path. The Larks looked at their helpless babes, and then at each other, and the next moment the father shook himself free from the long grass, and flew after the ploughman. The farmer was very near the corner now and the mother bird could feel the nest vibrate with the coming of the plough.

“ Brother,” cried the Lark, fluttering before the man. “ Good brother, spare my nest, I pray you. Be merciful and go round it with your great plough ; my children are but lately hatched and cannot fly, and my wife will die rather than leave them.”

The farmer checked his team in surprise and rested a moment. He looked at the brave little bird and said, “ What is this ? If I should spare your nest what good will it bring to me ? ”

“ Oh, you never can tell,” piped the Lark ; “ wait and see.”

The man, his better nature triumphing, promised

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

that he would guide his plough round the nest and leave that corner of his field untouched. "But," he added, "I have a wife at home who is not like yours, my brother. If I leave any part of my work undone, she will beat me when I return home to-night."

"What!" cried the astonished Lark. "You—a man—let a mere woman thrash you!"

The farmer looked abashed and uncomfortable. "You do not understand," he said. "You do not know her. She is as strong as I am, and has an evil tongue into the bargain."

The Lark had never heard such a strange tale, but he was full of gratitude when he looked at the shining blades of the plough, and thought of his family safe in the grass.

"I will help you," he said. "You must get a strong stick and the next time your wife abuses you, smite her hard with it; you will then see what you will see."

The man thanked the bird for his advice, and calling to the oxen went on with his work, while the Lark directed the line of furrows round the nest so that it remained untouched. This done he mounted into the air, and sang the most wonderful song above his dear ones.

The farmer finished his ploughing, and went home

THE LARK'S ADVICE

to supper. As he came over the brow of the hill his wife met him ; she was in a bad temper, for she had noted that he left a corner of the field untouched, and she proceeded to reproach him. The man said nothing and this made his wife more angry. At last she seized a great stick and made ready to belabour her wretched husband, but the man had learnt his lesson. Instead of cowering away, he seized the stick and wrenched it from her grasp, finding to his surprise that he was the stronger of the two. His wife was equally surprised and ran from him vowing vengeance, in a more dreadful rage than ever before.

The farmer started to follow, elated at his new-found courage, when the Lark flew down in the grass at his feet.

"Take care, brother," he said. "You will find your wife waiting for you at home with a long stick. You must take a short one and slip into the farm before she has time to catch you ; if you can get into the house you will have her at your mercy, as her stick will be too long for her to wield there."

Again the farmer thanked the bird, and did as he was directed. This time he really got his wife to himself ; he gave her a beating hard enough to last her for a month, and she left him in peace ever after.

Now this was the very first time that any man had

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

beaten his wife, and when the neighbouring farmers heard of the story they began to follow this excellent example, so that it was not long before all the men in the valley got the upper hand, and women could not say *Boo !* to a goose.

Finally the wives decided to hold a meeting to talk over the situation ; they all met together and the result was that they resolved to leave their husbands and depart across the river.

No sooner said than done, and this caused such commotion among the lonely husbands that they were ready to kill the farmer who was the cause of their trouble.

But the Lark flew again to the man and said, " You are a pack of old fools ! You don't know when you are well off. But wait and see ! " Then flying into the air he soared away to the Danube, where the women had arrived at the river bank and were preparing to cross. Then poising overhead on fluttering wings he sang :

Listen ! listen ! listen ! listen !

Hark ! Hark !

Are you there ? Are you there ? Are you there ?

On the other side of Danube there are no men,

D'ye hear ? No men ! No men !

NO MEN !

His song rose higher and higher as he himself

THE LARK'S ADVICE

gradually became a mere speck in the blue, and the wives looked at each other.

“ Did you hear *that* ? ” asked one in a whisper.

Then all turned round and went home again.

Ever since that day men have beaten their wives when they wanted to, and if a wife ever beats her husband—well, he deserves no better.

THE LAPWING'S SEARCH

FAR away in the East, in the land of the lotus and the pomegranate, there lived a beautiful Princess in the palace of her father, a great ruler over many lands.

Throughout her childhood she had been brought up with her only brother, whom she adored, and the two children had been seldom apart, either in their play in the royal gardens, in their rides abroad, or in their study of the Holy Writings, till one day the beloved brother was sent away to the wars, and the Princess saw him no more.

The Princess sorrowed and awaited his return ; but the days lengthened into months and the months into years, and still he did not come back. Then she began to ask anxiously for news of him ; she feared he had met his death in battle, but for a long time could get no definite answer, for those about her, knowing the lad had died a soldier's death, did not dare to tell the sad truth.

Finally, one of the courtiers, a man of a cruel heart, sent her a false message telling of the Prince's return ; overjoyed, the Princess hastened to prepare food that she knew her brother most loved, then hurried to meet

THE LAPWING'S SEARCH

him on his journey home, so as to welcome him the sooner. In her excitement she snatched up a pitcher of hot steaming milk to carry to her beloved and placed it on her head in the manner of all Eastern women. Thus burdened she hastened from the palace gates along the way the false courtier had said that the Prince would come, heedless of the burning burden.

Alas ! the way was desolate, and no horsemen appeared to break the monotony of the road. "Brother ! O brother ! " the Princess cried at length, as she wandered distraught over the countryside. "Brother ! O brother ! here am I, thy sister, come to meet thee ! Where art thou ? " So great was the anguish of her cry that Allah at last had pity upon her ; moved with compassion he gave her wings and turned her into a Lapwing, the better to pursue her quest.

So the bird is often seen wheeling over lonely moorlands and marshes, uttering her plaintive cry, "Brother ! O brother ! " as if seeking a mate she can never find, and Mohammedan women call her, "The little sister of the brother," in memory of the ancient tale.¹

¹ Compare this with the Danish myth that the plover are 'old maids,' the bachelors being the green sandpipers. The former fly about restlessly over the shore and moors where the sandpipers live, calling, "*Hoi vi' do it ?*" (Oh, why wouldn't you ?), and the sandpipers reply, as they take their short runs up and down the sands, "*Fo we turr it*" (Because we dare not), with the little peal of laughter that is often heard from them.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

When they hear her cry in the evening and see her flying sadly over the fields, they run out from their houses and throw water into the air toward her that they may ease the pain on her head. The burning pitcher now is marked only by a tuft of black burnt feathers.

TWO LITTLE STORIES OF THE SWALLOW

THE CHILDREN WHO WERE CHANGED INTO SWALLOWS

FROM the shores of an ocean in the far North there arose jagged cliffs that hung over the sea, as if frowning on the waves that beat against them. These cliffs were a favourite playground for the children, as the turf ran inland flat and smooth from the brink, and the roaring of the breakers below made music at their games.

One day a brother and sister strayed near the edge of the precipice, gathering the wild flowers that rooted only in the hard grey rock, with very little earth to sustain them.

When they tired of their search they began to play a game that all children love, making little houses out of stones and sticks and grasses, and plastering the walls with mud and clay dug from the cliff side.

Many birds had their nests on the ledges of those great cliffs: birds of the sea that flew far out over

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

the waves, seeking food and uttering their wailing notes. Their nests were built on little shelves and ledges in the cliff walls, just a few rough sticks laid together, where they reared their young.

In their search for material for their fairy homes, the children walking hand in hand at the edge of the cliff missed their footing and fell, to meet, as it seemed, a cruel death on the rocks below.

But the Great Spirit who watches over his little ones changed them into birds as they fell, and spreading their wings they flew safely away. And still they make little nests of mud and straw, as they did in play when they were children.

HOLY SUNDAY

Long, long ago when Time was young, the Swallow was a little servant, and he served Holy Sunday faithfully. But one day when his mistress was preparing to go to church she told him to make ready the mid-day meal, and be careful that it was neither too hot nor too cold, but just as she liked it. Then she went away, leaving the Swallow in the house alone. He cooked the dinner very well, and browned the potatoes and boiled the greens. Then he set the dishes on the hob to warm, while he made himself clean and tidy for Holy Sunday's return from church.



THE SWALLOW

TWO STORIES OF THE SWALLOW

Alas ! the hob was too warm and the dinner kept *too* hot ! Thus it happened that when Holy Sunday took up a plate it burned her hand, and when she tasted the food it burned her tongue. Then she grew angry and cursed her poor servant. "As thou hast not done my will," she said, "but hast burned me with this dinner, so shalt thou be for evermore a bird, scorched by the heat of the lands where thou shalt dwell."

That moment the little servant was changed into a blue-black Swallow, with a scarlet patch on his breast, and ever since he has made his nest in lofts and under the eaves of houses where the sun is hottest, and he travels in southern countries where the sun burns the people who live in them to a brownish colour like the desert.

WHY THE WAGTAIL WAGS HIS TAIL

A VERY long time ago the Wren had, as every one knows, a long and beautiful tail. Nowadays her nickname is 'Scutty,' because it is so short.

But in the days of which I am writing she was as proud of her tail feathers as a Long-tailed Tit, and she was very much admired.

Now, one day the Lark decided to get married. He asked every one to the wedding, which was to be a very smart affair indeed. Being spring time the birds had, luckily, all their new feathers ready, and they decided to put on their brightest colours for the occasion.

Among the guests invited was the Wagtail. At that time he had no tail at all, and was very worried about it. He felt that he could not go to the wedding looking like any guinea-pig, so he hopped along to the Wren and asked her if she would lend him her tail for the day, for he had heard that she was not going to the wedding as she was busy house-hunting, having been but lately married herself.

WHY THE WAGTAIL WAGS HIS TAIL

The Wren did not want to part with her lovely long tail, specially as her husband admired it exceedingly, but she did not wish to appear unkind, and she agreed with the Wagtail that he certainly needed a tail to make himself smart.

So she obligingly lent him her tail and he promised to return it next day.

The Wagtail carried the tail home under his wing and tried it on while perched on a branch overhanging a pool. He looked at his reflection in the water, and was overjoyed. He prinked and pranced about on that bough, flirting the tail in every possible way, and making such a display of himself that he nearly fell into the pool. At last he took himself off to the wedding, and cut such a figure that all the bridesmaids—the Titlarks—fell in love with him at first sight.

Dancing and chirruping the Wagtail spent a jolly evening, and the fun lasted well into the small hours of the morning.

Meantime the two Wrens had found a cosy little nest, and though they intended to build others themselves they used the empty one that night, and listened to the sounds of the wedding revelry as they nestled lovingly together.

“My poor tail,” murmured the Wren to her husband. “I hope it won’t be trampled on.”

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

"You were an angel to part with it," her mate answered lovingly, and the next moment they were both asleep.

The following morning no Wagtail appeared. The Wren excused him until midday, thinking he was sleeping off the effects of the party, but when two o'clock came, then three, and finally six, she sought him out.

The conceited bird tried to pretend that he did not know what the Wren was talking about. He was, indeed, so rude that she flew back to her mate in great distress, and he, poor little fellow, was furious.

But they could do nothing with the dishonest Wagtail, and so the Wren's babies were born without tails. Father Wren tried to comfort his wife by saying that for his part he was quite satisfied, and that tails or no tails he loved his wife just as much, which almost made her happy again.

The Wagtail pays dearly for his thieving; he has such a guilty conscience that he is always afraid lest the Wrens will regain the tail. You may see him perpetually wagging it up and down; this is to assure himself that it is still there.

As for the Wrens, they are so happy that they have forgotten their loss, and Father Wren took his tail off, too, out of sympathy.

THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE WORM

IT seems to have been a common trick in the long ago that when the birds gathered together for some festive purpose one or another of the guests would appear in finery or features borrowed or stolen from a neighbour for the occasion.

It was at Jenny Wren's wedding, before she lent her lovely tail to the Wagtail, that the Nightingale played the trick on the Blindworm.

This poor fellow had excellent eyes in those days and it was the Nightingale who was blind. Moreover, although he sang quite nicely, his notes were not more beautiful than those of many other birds, and he had been asked to the wedding merely out of politeness.

Upon receiving the invitation the Nightingale made up his mind to borrow the Worm's eyes, as, of course, *he* would not have been asked. So he made his way to him, guided by a Robin, who was always ready to do anyone a good turn, and asked him whether he would lend his bright eyes for the occasion.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

"To be sure I will," said the good-natured Worm. "But let me have them back to-morrow as I have a special tunnel to dig."

The Nightingale promised and eagerly clapped the eyes into his head. Then so excited was he at all he saw that he could hardly contain himself; he flew up and down the woods again and again, the joy of being able to see the trees for the first time in his life being almost more than he could endure.

Then he went to the wedding and his joyous singing filled the air with melody.

But when all was over he could not bring himself to give back the eyes to the poor Worm, who still waits patiently for them as he burrows sadly underground in the dark.

Like the Wagtail who stole the Wren's tail, the Nightingale does not mean to be unkind. Indeed, he is very remorseful sometimes, though this does not induce him to give up the eyes. He has learnt to sing more beautifully than any other bird, and sings all day and all night for the blind Worm to soothe his sorrow, and to try to make him forget that he who was once his friend has so miserably deceived him.

And in case the Worm's cousins, the Snakes, may catch him, and snatch back the eyes, he builds his

THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE WORM

nest in thorny, prickly places so that they cannot kill his babies.¹

But the Worm has never forgotten, and does not listen to his songs.

¹ Some say he builds his nest so that a sharp thorn sticks up in the centre with which he pricks himself, in token of his remorse.

“And whiles against a thorn thou bear’st thy part
To keep thy sharp woes waking.”

Shakespeare

HOW THE WREN MADE A BID FOR THE CROWN

ONCE upon a time a great quarrel arose among the birds. They had no king in those days, and so they respected no one and would never admit a judge in their disputes.

The Woodpeckers claimed that they, and they alone, owned the right-of-way round the trunks of trees. But the Tree-creepers asserted that if only by virtue of their name, they had the better claim, and battles raged loud and long whenever the rivals met.

Then the Thrushes and the Blackbirds were continually quarrelling over the length of their worms. You might have seen the Thrushes spreading out their captures, and the Blackbirds holding down first one end of a worm and then the other to keep them from wriggling, never quite able to stretch their legs far enough apart to keep down both ends at once. Measure how they would, it could never be decided which had the longest worms in the day's hunting.

But this was not all. The Cockatoos talked down

THE WREN'S BID FOR THE CROWN

the Parrots, and the Magpies stole faster than the Jackdaws, and altogether affairs were in a very bad state indeed.

However, the birds at length began to realize that this must stop, and the news went round one day that a mass meeting was to be held in the middle of a great plain where there were no trees, so that those who perched should have no unfair advantage over those upon the ground. This was in itself a great step forward ; usually the Ducks and Moorhens and Turkeys and Penguins had little chance of seeing what was going on, while other birds in the tops of tall trees had excellent views of everything.

As the crowd gathered, in some mysterious way the birds found themselves arranged in neat rows, the smallest birds to the front. Only the Swifts were allowed to remain on the wing ; they were so unhappy if they had to perch or stand.

Talking now became the order of the day, and amid a babel of sound it was decided that to have peace in the bird world a king must be chosen whose word would be law. It was argued that as Crabs had kings, and Oysters had kings, and even Man had kings, Birds also should have a king. This seemed unanswerable, and so the question now arose, Who should be king ? Whereupon the babel commenced again.

But at last it was agreed that he who should fly

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

nearest to the sun should then and there be crowned King of the Birds.

Without further ado the contest started, and all the birds took part, though most of them knew that they had not the slightest chance of winning. The Swifts looked after the order of starting, but the Bullfinches whistled the signal for each to be off. Up went the Tits, with a saucy wink at the Finches as they began their little flights ; up went the Robins, with a flirt of their tails ; up floundered the Ravens, their great wings slowly flapping, and so on and on until only the strongest flyers were left. Then the Larks rose from the ground, singing as they went in praise of the sky and the sun, and full of the joy of life. But the Kites, who followed, soon passed them and were lost like a speck in the blue, they flew so high ; and all held their breath, for none wanted a Kite to be king.

Finally an Eagle took his place. At the whistle from a Bullfinch he spread his great pinions and sailed majestically up and away, and the birds knew that here was their king, who could fly into the sun unblinking and untired. And they waited in silence for his return, when they would acclaim him victor.

But one bird had been forgotten. The Swifts had overlooked the littlest Wren, who was only able to reach the line at the last moment, and just as the Eagle was starting on his flight the tiny creature had

THE WREN'S BID FOR THE CROWN

perched unseen on his tail. He clung tightly with claws and beak to the great bird, until having soared far above all others the Eagle could fly no more from weariness, then the Wren darted out and above him, fresh and triumphant, piping in his shrill note: "Look up! Behold your King!"

The Eagle was angry at the trick, and beside himself with rage. As the Wren descended he dealt him such a blow with his wing that the little fellow has not been able to fly higher than a hawthorn bush ever since. The Wren was really more frightened than hurt, but he lost part of his tail from the blow, which is another reason why he has such a short one to-day.

The birds not only made the Eagle king; they gave him added credit for having carried the extra weight of the tricky Wren during his great flight, and to this day the Eagle's feathers are the most cherished ornament that an Indian warrior can bear.

It was generally agreed that the Wren deserved further punishment, and the birds decided to shut him up in a hole in a tree while they considered his case. For jailer they set an old Brown Owl to guard him. They had forgotten, however, that it was still daylight, and the old Owl blinked and blinked and grew sleepier and sleepier, until at last he fell fast asleep.

Then—out popped the Wren! and when the

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

judges came to claim their prisoner—‘ the bird had flown.’

How they scolded the poor Owl ! They hunted him round and round that tree, and hustled and chased him into the woods. To this day no Owl will venture forth till dusk or dark, but sits from morning till night close pressed against a tree trunk, trying to avoid detection.

But when the sun has gone down he flies noiselessly about looking for the Wren, and that is why, I think, Jenny and her mate build so many extra nests which they do not use. They never know when the Owl will poke in his beak, but luckily he rarely catches them at home ; he cannot be sure which nest they are living in.

WHEN THE BLACKBIRD WAS WHITE

ONCE upon a time there were no Blackbirds, the reason being that the plumage of the Blackbirds was white as snow ! ¹

But though white of feathers they were by no means pure of heart ; the King of the Whitebirds, for example, was a very greedy fellow indeed, and his wife shared his weakness for collecting treasures belonging to others.

Now one day, in the middle of summer, when the trees were all green and the birds were resting in the deep shade, the King of the Whitebirds opened one eye as he perched half asleep near his nest, and caught a glimpse of something white which flashed between the leaves.

In a moment he was wide awake, both legs down, head up ; for was not he the King, and who dared to disturb the royal slumbers ?

Imagine his surprise, however, when he discovered

¹ The Italians say the bird became black because in one year, the last two days of January and the first of February (' blackbirds ' days ') were so cold that it had to take refuge in the chimney.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

that the gleam he had seen came from a black and white bird who was flying in and out among the thickly entwined branches bearing a glistening jewel in his beak.

“ Who are you ? ” whistled the King.

The strange bird placed his burden carefully in a little hole in an old oak tree, and then bowed politely.

“ Magpie, Your Majesty,” he chattered, “ and at your service.”

“ What are you hiding ? ” demanded the King, sternly.

The Magpie looked around very slowly, and then brought forward his long tail until it screened his beak—so that he was able to whisper from behind it, like ladies do in Spain.

“ It is a diamond,” he softly breathed at last, and the King leaned forward on his twig to catch the word, very nearly falling off in his eagerness.

The Magpie put up his claw and touched the White-bird on the beak to warn him not to speak loudly ; then he added mysteriously, “ Come with me and I will show you a thing or two ! ” which was impudent language to use to a king, even for Magpies, who are not noted for good manners at any time.

Without a word to his wife the King of the White-birds slipped noiselessly off the branch, little thinking that it was almost the last time he would ever do it—

WHEN THE BLACKBIRD WAS WHITE

for whoever hears a Blackbird do anything noiselessly nowadays ?

For eight nights and eight days the King flew with the wicked Magpie, through forest glades and over heathery moors, alighting now and again to slake their thirst from a crystal pool deep hidden in a wood, or from a brown babbling brook on its rocky way down to the sea.

In the early dawns fat slugs provided breakfast, caught as they hastened bedward ; and so they journeyed on until the ninth night found them in a desolate place, with great high cliffs and towering rocky crags.

Suddenly the Magpie turned aside toward a big black rock, into which he disappeared. Following close after the Whitebird espied a tiny crevice ; he squeezed through this and found himself in a narrow dark passage and heard the beat of the Magpie's wings not far ahead.

At last the passage widened and the birds flew into a large cavern hewn from the rock, with walls of shining silver.

" Here is the treasure," whispered the Magpie, as they perched on a silver bar.

But the King answered : " I must have gold. Let us pass on, good leader." And obedient to his wish the Magpie again spread his wings and the King

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

pressed eagerly after him until they reached another great cave in which the walls glittered with gold and the floor was heaped thick with shining dust. The King did not see the evil look which the Magpie gave him, as with a hoarse chuckle he disappeared.

Taking no heed of anything but the treasure, the Whitebird plunged his beak into the dust, but as he did so there was a loud roar and into the cavern rushed a demon, breathing forth fire and smoke.

The bird fluttered up in terror only just in time to escape the burning blast; he found a narrow cleft that pierced the roof, and through this he darted into the summer air.

But although he had escaped the fire, the black smoke from the demon's mouth had overtaken him.

He fluttered feebly home, remembering mournfully that he had left his mate full sixteen days before without bidding her farewell, nor telling her of his quest.

When he reached her side she gazed at her lord with horror, and without a word took him to look at his own reflection in a pool of clear cold water near their home.

And behold! in place of the white feathers which he expected he saw a bird as black as soot. The only treasure that he had brought back was a shining golden beak.

WHEN THE BLACKBIRD WAS WHITE

The Queen in silence tried with might and main to clean the grimy feathers in the pool, but with no success ; the angry smoke was magic and could not be washed away.

At last, tired out, she rested, and then suddenly her troubled eyes rested on the water. Judge of her surprise when she saw that she was nearly as black as her husband ! The smoke had stained her pure white feathers too ; this was the reward for her devotion !

The Whitebird now wears a coal black suit and golden beak ; that is why he changed his name, and why Mrs Blackbird is clad in a dull brown dress, with spots of smoky black, no longer queen : and why he jumps with fright whenever he is startled, and flies off heavily as if blundering through a dark passage.

THE SPARROW AND THE WASHERWOMAN

ONCE upon a time there lived an old woman who was always as cross as two sticks. This may have been because she often scalded her hands in a wash-tub, for she was a washerwoman, and had to scrub away at other people's clothes. Sometimes the soap got into her eyes, and then she was crosser than ever.

It happened one day that she was starching her husband's shirt. She had made her starch mixture, but in doing so had spilt some of the white grains on the ground. Seeing what looked to him like food, a Sparrow hopped down from the wall on which he had been sitting, and pecked at the starch powder as it lay near the wash-tub.

As he did so the woman turned and with an angry cry made a dive at the poor little bird. She seized him with her great wet hand, and then snatching up a pair of sharp scissors she cut out his tongue.

"That'll teach you not to go pickin' around here on

THE SPARROW AND THE WOMAN

my washing day ! ” she snapped at him, and threw the Sparrow over the garden wall.

Sore and miserable the bird flew to the blue mountains which rose to meet the clouds far away.

Now, next door to the washerwoman lived an old couple who loved the Sparrow, and they were terribly sad when their pet no longer came to eat the crumbs they scattered for him ; after a time they set out to look for him, for they feared that some misfortune must have come to him.

On and on they travelled, until one day they came to the blue mountains and decided to climb the slopes. As they neared the top of a great peak they heard the chirp of a bird, and then to their delight they saw their own dear Sparrow, well and happy, talking to his wife as if he had twenty tongues. For his part the Sparrow was just as pleased to see his friends, and at once flew toward them and implored them to come into his house to rest after their long journey. So the old folk went on with the Sparrow and his wife, who flew before them to show the way through the narrow mountain clefts. They reached the Sparrow’s home and finally sat down before a table laden with good things to eat, and with rich red wine to refresh them.

As they ate, their host told them what had happened to him at the cruel hands of the washerwoman, and how well and happy he now was in the Magic Moun-

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

tains. His wife waited at the table and the children and grandchildren darted in and out carrying the dishes. When the meal was over, the Sparrow himself danced the Sparrow Dance before his guests.

At last it was time for the visitors to leave. When they rose and began to say good-bye, the little Sparrows, at a sign from their father, brought in two large wicker baskets, and placed them on the table.

"One of these is heavy, and one is light, Mother," said the Sparrow to the old woman. "I want you to take one of them home with you. Which will you choose?"

"Oh, the light one, Son," said she. "We have far to go, and I know my good man will insist on carrying it for me."

The bird gave the basket to her, and after saying farewell, the old couple set out, and at last reached home none the worse for their adventure.

Then they opened the basket.

To their surprise they found it full of gold and silver and precious stones, wonderful silks and satins and rich brocades. As often as they took these gleaming treasures out, the basket was filled again by morning.

So they grew rich and prosperous, and never ceased to bless their little friend the Sparrow.

Now, the washerwoman who lived next door soon came to hear of her neighbours' good fortune.

THE SPARROW AND THE WOMAN

“What’s all this about a Sparrow?” she said enviously. “I will go and see him for myself. Pesky birds that they are . . .” and off she went to the mountains.

On her journey everything befell as to the old couple. But when the moment came to choose a basket she greedily claimed the heavy one, expecting it to contain a richer treasure, and she returned home dragging it painfully behind her.

With doors bolted and shutters closed she prepared to open her prize. She tugged eagerly at the fastening of the lid, gloating over the thought of her future riches. The lid fell back with a jerk and out jumped seven evil spirits who sprang upon the wicked woman and she was never seen again.

THE BULLFINCH WHO WAS ONCE A WICKED GROCER

IN a little town on the shores of the Black Sea there once lived a grocer.

He was not tall, but he was **very** fat and had a face as red and shiny as one of his own cheeses.

Everybody in the town hated and feared this man. He cheated and robbed his customers, giving them not only short weight but bad groceries ; but they did not dare make any complaint to him as he had lent most of them money, and they knew that he could make things very uncomfortable for them. If they could not pay by the due date, he would take the clothes from off their backs and the chairs from under them and the spoons from their porridge bowls—so very cruel was he.

One day the grocer was looking over his books and found that a young widow owed him a small sum. He rubbed his fat hands together and chuckled to himself ; then he put on his black fur cap and made his way down the little street to where the widow lived with her only child.



THE BULLFINCH

THE BULLFINCH

He rapped on the door with his heavy stick and demanded to be let in, and then went on to threaten the poor woman, saying that if she did not pay her debt within the next twenty-four hours he would seize her house and send her homeless into the streets.

In vain the girl wept and implored him to wait yet one more week. In vain she pointed to her baby and asked his pity.

The wicked grocer merely laughed rudely as he went out of the cottage, slamming the door behind him.

When the neighbours heard of this last threat they were very angry, and all gathered quietly in the widow's little room to pray to God for help.

Their prayers were so heartfelt that they moved God to pity, and He punished the evil grocer once and for all.

In the twinkling of an eye He changed him into a Bullfinch, a bird that has some evil resemblance to a man. He has a great wide mouth, as the grocer had, and a head shaped like a melon. He has black feathers on his head, fitting closely like the lambskin cap the grocer once wore, and his red breast is the colour of the heart's blood of the poor creatures whose money and happiness had been drained away from them. Then he has a big body, for the grocer had grown fat on his dishonesty.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Nowadays if a Bullfinch is caught he remembers his history, and whenever he is imprisoned in a cage he thinks that it is a punishment for his former cruelties, and beats against the bars in despair.

The wicked grocer has been punished enough ; shall we not let his descendants go free ?

WHY THE WOODPECKER LAUGHS AT FROGS

ONE day a Woodpecker was sitting at the top of a tree. She had been carpentering for goodness knows how long, and was as dry as a chip.

Just as she was getting quite deep down in her hole and had made it large enough to sit in, she heard a *buzz*, and saw a Bee fly past.¹

"No Bee without honey," thought she, and running down the tree and along a dead branch she found a nest and lots of honey. The Woodpecker was soon at work, and was enjoying the feast when she spied a fat old Frog sitting down below, watching her with his round eyes that stuck out of the sides of his head.

"Give me a lick," said he presently.

"Certainly," said the Woodpecker, with her mouth full. "Come up here with me."

"No wings," replied the Frog, who never wasted words.

¹ In German the name 'Woodpecker' signifies 'Bee-eater.'

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

“ True,” said the bird. “ Tie yourself to that creeper and I’ll pull you up.”

The Frog looked about him and found a nice strong creeper, and also saw in a bush at the root of the tree a small bucket which a child had left behind. He made the creeper fast to the handle, and then hopped into the bucket. “ Heave ho ! ” he called to the Woodpecker, for Frogs always speak like this, as they live so much in the water.

The Woodpecker cleaned her beak on a twig and heaved. But just before the bucket reached the branch on which she was perched a wicked thought came into her head ; before Mr Frog could hop out she let the bucket fall again with a run.

The Frog was in a passion, but the Woodpecker laughed in the most unfeeling way, and flew off through the trees, jeering as she went.

Then the Frog went away and sat all alone in a marsh for quite an hour, wondering how to get even with the Woodpecker.

Suddenly he opened his huge mouth and very solemnly began to drink. And he drank and drank all the water in all the rivers and lakes in the world. You can imagine how thirsty everybody soon became for the world was as dry as a dust-heap. But the Frog sat alone, as tight as a drum with all the water inside him.

THE WOODPECKER AND THE FROGS

At last things became so uncomfortable that the animals and birds decided to hold a meeting. Many were dying of thirst, and conditions were most serious. All blamed the Woodpecker, who had gleefully told the story of her practical joke. "It's your fault," they said ; " you will have to get us out of this mess."

Then everybody began talking at once.

" Prick him ! " said the Cranesbill.

" Squash him ! " said the Ostrich.

" Suck him ! " said the Goatsucker.

" Eat him ! " said the Stork.

" Be quiet, all of you ! " at last cried the Woodpecker, who had been thinking very hard. " There is only one thing to do. He must be made to laugh ; then he will have to open his mouth and all the water will come out naturally. What on earth is the good of *pricking* him ! " she added, turning scornfully to the Cranesbill ; " do you want froggish water to drink ? "

This was unanswerable, so all the animals went and sat in a ring round the victim.

The Frog was as grave as only a Frog can be. He had swollen to a tremendous size and gazed straight in front of him as solemnly as if his grandmother had just swallowed a dragon-fly.

First of all a Monkey made faces at him. He made such comical grimaces that the animals had

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

to stuff their tails into their mouths to stop their laughter.

The Frog did not even blink.

Then two Swifts tried to have a hopping race. Have you ever seen a Swift hop? Well, if you had been there your sides would have ached.

The Frog only turned down the corners of his mouth more than ever.

Next two Pigs borrowed Eagles' wings, and pretended to fly. The audience roared at their foolish capers.

But the Frog was as glum as could be.

After many other unsuccessful attempts by the animals which did not raise even a smile, an Eel began to dance very slowly on the extreme tip of his tail. Eels can be very solemn at times; he wept as he danced, the tears trickling down his cheeks, and because he was so thirsty he drank them up as they fell.

This was more than the Frog could bear and suddenly his self-control gave way. The water began to trickle out of his eyes like tears, and the next moment with a terrific gurgle, he shut his eyes, opened his mouth, and laughed till he nearly burst. Out poured the water, and the rivers and lakes and ponds and streams were soon filled again; ever since there has always been enough water to go round.

THE WOODPECKER AND THE FROGS

But sometimes there is what is called a Drought, when the ponds dry up in the summer. Then you may hear the Woodpeckers laughing in the trees; they are thinking of the old joke of the Frog in the bucket, and of the trouble one Woodpecker caused once upon a time.

KING SOLOMON AND THE HOOPOES

LONG, long ago the great King Solomon was crossing a desert in the blazing heat of the day, when it is not safe for man or beast to be out in the strong Eastern sun.

In spite of fans waved before him, and the huge shade held over him by his slaves, the King was most uncomfortable, when suddenly he became aware that the scorching rays had lost much of their power, and that a feathery veil floated between him and the fierce heat.

The King looked up in surprise, and saw that a number of Hoopoes were flying between him and the sun, evidently to shelter him. They whirled and floated above his head like a refreshing cloud in the sky.

Solomon was very grateful to the birds for their kindness, and when he returned to his palace he sent for the leader of the Hoopoes and invited him to name the reward the birds would most desire. The Hoopoe bowed himself out of the royal presence and went in

KING SOLOMON AND THE HOOPOES

haste to ask the other Hoopoes what gift they most desired.

All declared that above everything else they would like to wear golden crowns, and their leader went back to Solomon to tell him this.

Solomon was troubled when he heard the request, for being the wisest of all living men he knew that it was a very foolish one, but he could not take back his word, and in less time than it takes to tell, all the Hoopoes were strutting about with golden-crested heads, preening themselves before the other birds.

Alas for their short-lived satisfaction !

A fowler soon saw one of them, and attracted by the bright crown, which shone in the sunlight, he stalked the bird over desert and marsh until he caught it in his net.

There was now no peace for the Hoopoes, for the prize of the golden crown was so great a temptation that men snared and netted the prey without mercy. There seemed to be no way of escape, and all this suffering had come to the birds because of their foolish desire for the golden crowns.

At last one or two of the remaining Hoopoes flew to Solomon, and with tears and lamentation implored him to take back his gift, so that they might again live in safety.

Solomon spoke to the birds of their folly, and made

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

them promise not to be such vain and foolish creatures again. Then taking off the glittering crowns he gave each a feathered crest instead, and sent them happily away.

The fowlers were now no longer tempted by the glittering crowns, and the Hoopoes lived in peace again.

THE TAILS OF THE STORKS

ONE day a young lad, who was a Prince in his own country, was wandering along a river bank, throwing crumbs to the rising fish. He was a handsome youth, and beloved by all birds and creatures because of his kindness to them. Followed by several Dogs and his pet Goat, and with a cloud of Pigeons circling round his head, he strolled on till he reached the marshes. Here the river lost itself for a space before reappearing on the other side as a tiny stream.

Glancing round, the Prince saw, not very far away, a fine Stork digging with his long, pointed beak for worms in the mud. The bird seemed very intent on his meal and suddenly he appeared to be struggling with something he could not raise. The lad ran up and found that the poor Stork was caught in a coil of rusted wire and could not get his beak free. It was the work of a moment for the bird to be loosed by the Prince's deft fingers.

The great Stork shook himself and ruffled his feathers, stretching out his long neck to ease it after the cramped position it had been in ; he then turned

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

politely to the Prince. "A thousand thanks, young sir," he said throatily. "You have saved me from a very uncomfortable attack of cramp. I am glad to show my gratitude to such a kindly spirit," and jerking his head round he plucked out a tail feather with his pincer-like beak. "Allow me to present this feather to Your Royal Highness. If you are ever in any danger or need, you have only to wave it in the air, and I shall be at your side."

The lad was gratified at the Stork's useful gift and thanked him heartily; then he fastened the feather in his cap and quickly returned home.

Now the Prince did not know that he had actually been of service to the King of all the Storks himself, but such indeed was the case. The royal bird had not promised his help idly. There came a day when the young man remembered his adventure, and waved the feather in good earnest as he leaned out of a castle window that looked toward the sunset.

He had not long to wait. There was a rush of great wings and King Stork settled on the roof, and the youth climbed out upon it to reach him.

"The King, my father, has asked me to bring him the Water of Life and the Water of Death," the Prince burst out, as soon as he got within speaking distance. "He vows I shall not inherit the kingdom if I disappoint him, and I know of no way to discover the

THE TAILS OF THE STORKS

Magic Waters. All I am told is that the Water of Death will bring healing to the wounded body, and that the Water of Life will give Immortality."

The King of the Storks stood first on one leg and then on the other and thought for quite a long time, his head sunk low on his breast, his eyes half-shut. The Prince wondered if the bird had really gone to sleep, and if he ought to repeat what he had said. As he hesitated, the Stork stretched one leg after another, opened his eyes wide, and said, "I will do my best for you, young man. Tell your father the King to give you a week in which to obtain the Waters, and I shall be with you before that time is up."

So saying he spread his wings, and with his gloriously feathered tail streaming out behind him, he floated away into the twilight.

When the King of all the Storks reached his palace in the West, he summoned his subjects from every part of his kingdom and asked them if they had seen or heard of the great angry Mountains of the North that guarded the mysterious Waters of Life and Death. He waited after he had put the question, but none made reply. One and all, the Storks looked straight down their beaks and said nothing, and their King asked the question again. Still there was no reply from the young and lusty birds, but a lame and

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

feeble old Stork hobbled forward, and bowed unsteadily before the throne.

There was a titter from the onlookers, but the King glared around, and the laughter died away.

"Please, Your Majesty," mumbled the old bird, "*I* have been to the country of the Knocking Mountains that watch over the Magic Waters. See my crippled leg and my blinded eye. Are they not proof enough?"

The King listened gravely until he had finished, and then gently waved him aside.

"Surely some of you have ventured so far?" he said, addressing the younger Storks.

There was not a sound.

Then: "Who will go now?" the King demanded. "The Waters must be fetched, however great the perils to be overcome."

The cowardly young Storks made no movement. Again the old bird limped forward.

"I will go, Your Majesty," he quavered.

The King glanced at him in pity, and yet again appealed to the younger birds, only to meet with the same miserable silence. With a last look of contempt the King turned his tail on the miserable cowards and called the cripple to his side.

"Do you think that you can really fetch the Water?" he asked kindly. "I am shamed before my Court, but

THE TAILS OF THE STORKS

you are so old and feeble that I shrink from sending you again on such a perilous journey."

"I will try," answered the bird. "But first, Your Majesty must bind under my wings both meat and drink for the journey and I must have fastened to my legs two bottles to contain the Waters when I have found them."

There was again a half-suppressed giggle from the young birds. Turning sharply round, the King ordered them from his presence.

At last the aged Stork was ready and he rose bravely into the air on his still powerful wings, his legs tucked under him, his long tail acting as a rudder behind him in the wind.

He flew straight to the great mountains, whose tops only could be seen in the farthest distance, and as he drew nearer he heard a great noise of rolling boulders. It sounded as though giants were warring with each other on the distant peaks. On he went, however, until he was suddenly stopped by a tiny Swallow, who flew up to him and twittered, "Stop, stop, O Stork! Do not go further or you are most certainly doomed!"

"Who are you?" asked the Stork. "I do not remember having met you before."

"You have, none the less," rejoined the other. "I remember the day you lost an eye; I am the guardian spirit of these mountains, and it is my duty to prevent

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

every one who is foolish enough to come here from losing his life."

"Well, well," sighed the Stork. "I suppose I must take counsel, for I am not so young as I was. What can I do, Swallow, to get between the Knocking Mountains and reach the Waters of Life and Death?"

The Swallow looked so alarmed that the Stork added quickly, "You need not tell me if you would rather not, but I shall go to the mountains with or without your aid."

So the Swallow, seeing that his mind was made up, said, "If you are so rash and determined, O aged Stork, I can do little to help you. But at least you can take the counsel I have to give. When you reach the mountains you must hide yourself and wait until they rest from their knocking. This they will do for half an hour when they are tired. The moment you see them stop, rise as high as you can into the air, and then, folding your great wings, you must drop like a stone deep down into the chasm between them. Along the bottom run the Rivers of Life and Death. There, in the darkness, you must stand on a ledge of rock that you will find and hang your bottles over either side of the dividing stone, to await the rising of the springs. Then when the bottles are full, cork them tightly and bind them again upon you, and rise swiftly to the light. But remember, if you so much

THE TAILS OF THE STORKS

as touch the side of the chasm with one feather, you will be lost for ever, and your quest will fail.”

The Stork thanked the Swallow. Then he flew on steadily toward the place from whence came a terrific din of massive cliffs clashing together like thunder, and hid himself behind a rock. As he rested he ate the remains of the food he had brought with him, so as to be able to fly the lighter. Then despite the terrific noise he began to doze, tired out with his long effort.

Suddenly he started up. What had happened? He shook himself, but could not understand the strange feeling that had come over the place. Then he realized with a shock that a great silence had fallen on the mountains, and that the noise which had deafened him had ceased.

The mountains were resting; there was not a moment to lose. Remembering the Swallow's advice, the Stork silently rose straight into the air, and looked down upon the tops of the mountains from an immense height. He could see the two rugged peaks, almost panting from their exertions, while water dashed down their sides in mighty cascades. Between them was a vast cleft that looked a rich blue, so deep was it. With his wings folded close to his sides the Stork dropped like a stone, right down to the very centre of the gorge.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

He found the ledge, and filled his bottles, marvelling at the beauty of the underground rivers. Then he fastened up the precious liquid securely and rose aloft without delay. This time he had to go slowly, burdened by the weight of the water, and fearful of making the slightest sound. Several times he longed to rest on a flat slab of rock that jutted out invitingly from the side of the chasm, but again the Swallow's warning came to his mind, and he struggled up and up.

As he reached the top, and the sunlight began to dazzle his old eye, his sweeping tail dislodged from the brink of the precipice a tiny pebble and it fell echoing into the depths. With a roar like that of a wounded bull, the mountains awoke, and in the same second closed with a sickening crash. The Stork shot into the air, feeling a fierce pain in his flight, and looking back he saw that his tail feathers were caught fast in the monsters' grip.

"There goes the last of my beauty," murmured the poor old bird, as he flew slowly back to the palace, worn out with his exertion and the pain from his wounded tail.

He found the King of the Storks, with his Court gathered round him, anxiously awaiting him, and limped sadly into the royal presence, conscious of his wretched and travel-worn appearance.

The King, however, was delighted to see him, and

106

THE TAILS OF THE STORKS

came down himself from his throne to take the heavy bottles off his legs. As he stooped to do so, he heard the tittering of the heartless young birds. For the first time the King perceived the reason for their mirth. He turned a flashing eye on the crowd, and his scornful glance silenced the young Storks.

"Where are *your* tails?" the King thundered. "You dare to jeer at one who has brought honour to our Kingdom, and enabled me to keep my pledged word! Not one of you has dared to risk his tail in this noble cause, and you shall go dishonoured to your graves."

So saying he withdrew with the aged Stork, and his courtiers, looking anxiously behind them, found to their horror that they had not a tail feather between them, and to this day there are as tailless as guinea-pigs.

The Prince received his Magic Waters, and not only inherited the kingdom but married the Princess of his heart. And you must not think that all Storks are as rude and heartless as those courtiers, for the brave old Stork married again and had so many children that the Storks you meet to-day in Holland are probably all descended from him. They are without tails, it is true, but they have the kindest of hearts.

UNDAN THE PELICAN

UNDAN THE PELICAN was hungry.

He stalked along, searching for food with his heavy beak, and tried in vain to fill his great pouch ; it only grew flabbier and flabbier, and he seemed to be unable to find anything to eat.

Now Undan was a lonely bird. He did not mix with others, but sat apart and meditated more than was good for him.

Sometimes these thoughts were cunning ones and did him no credit, as you will hear.

Rūan the Fish lived with his family in a big pool at the foot of a waterfall. He was quite a wise old fish in a way, but no fish has a great amount of brains, and Rūan was no match for Undan when it came to a battle of wits.

He slept as near the bottom of the pool as possible, looking like a brown-coloured stone, just as his father had done before him, and he rose for his dinner at sundown as every self-respecting fish does to-day. But for all that he could not see very far from the end of his nose. So when Undan came and stood beside the pool, looking down his beak at the water, Rūan

UNDAN THE PELICAN

came up to the top, just to pass the time of day, and to ask for news, without a thought of mistrust in his mind.

“ Good evenin’ to you, Rūan,” said Undan.

“ Good evenin’ to *you*, Undan,” replied Rūan, making a successful snatch at a fly. “ What’s the news of the river ? ”

“ Ill news, I fear,” said Undan gloomily, stretching his neck. “ There’s a drought in the upper reaches, and before very long this pool will be a mere trickle of water.”

“ Goodness me ! ” exclaimed Rūan, in horror. “ And what will become of us, I should like to know ? Are you sure of what you say, Undan ? ”

“ Quite sure,” said Undan.

“ Then what are we to do ? ” asked poor Rūan helplessly.

“ I have thought of a plan,” said the Pelican. “ There is a marvellous deep pool near here, with a spring at the bottom which has never been known to go dry. If you like, I will carry you carefully there in my beak—all your family too, one by one, before this pool dries up. What do you think of the idea ? ”

This was a very long speech for Undan to make ; Rūan was overjoyed at the generous offer, and accepted gratefully. He did not pause to consider that if there was a drought above, the waterfall ought by now to

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

be showing signs of it, but he swam down at once to tell the news to his family. This done he arranged with Undan that they should both go to explore the new pool, so as to be able to tell the others about the journey. Meantime the other fish were to get ready in Rūan's absence. Undan lifted the plump fish in his beak and carried him to a pool just round the bend of the river. But Rūan thought he had been taken at least a thousand miles away from home.

He nearly died in the air and was thankful when he was dropped safely into the cool water, and was able to take in great gulps of it again. The new pool was delightful, and when he had sufficiently rested and explored it, Undan carried him back to his family so that he could tell them all about it.

He found them waiting near the bank, half-expecting the water to disappear at any moment, and all were very much excited. He told them about their journey, and then Undan took him to the new pool again and went back for the family.

Some time passed, then as none of the little Rūans had arrived their father began to grow anxious. He swam round and round his new quarters, going into all sorts of queer places, and making friends with the fish who were already living there, but none of them had heard a word about the drought. Poor Rūan grew more and more uneasy, and at last his new

UNDAN THE PELICAN

friends came to the top of the pool with him to watch for the family.

There was not a sign of Undan. Had Rūan and his new friends been able to reach the banks, they could have seen him taking the jolly little fish one by one out of their pool, carrying them a little distance, and then gobbling them up. But he was careful to do this out of sight of the others. It was most cruel and heartless behaviour.

When the family of little Rūans had been devoured, Undan turned his attention to the Crabs, with intent to play the same trick on them. But Kětaun, the oldest Crab, was a clever fellow who walked abroad as much as he lived in the water. He had seen all that had happened to Rūan's children, but he pretended to be very much interested in Undan's theory about the water, and was apparently eager to be taken to the other pool. Undan bent down to pick the Crab up for the journey, but Kětaun clambered quickly up the great beak, and, to avenge Rūan's family, pinched the wicked Undan's neck with his strong claws, squeezing him till he died.

And you will be glad to hear that the little fishes were rescued out of that great pouch by Kětaun, and restored to their father in the new pool. So in the end it was only Undan himself who was the sufferer for his greedy, evil ways.

THE ANCIENT SPARROW

EVERY one knows that the Sparrow is not a bird to be trifled with ; he lives for nine hundred years or longer, and as he never forgets either an enemy or a friend, he is fairly certain to get the best of any quarrel in the long run.

There was once a great forest which spread over the hills of France, and in its very centre was a clearing where the Sun and Wind came down to smile on a tiny Oak Sapling that was growing up among the elder Oaks. They loved it, for it reminded them of the days when they also had been young, and they protected it, and saw that it had its full share of sunshine and rain.

One day a Sparrow came flying through the forest.

Being only a little bird he felt rather a dwarf among the great trees, and was on the look out for something more of his own size. When he spied the Sapling alone in the open space he flitted across to it and perched on its topmost twig to rest for a while.

Now the Sapling, like a spoilt child, was angry that the Sparrow dared to sit upon its head without asking leave, so it said peevishly, " Why do you sit on my

THE ANCIENT SPARROW

head, you nasty Sparrow? I am so small that I bend under your weight. Can't you perch on something else? You are crumpling up my leaves."

The Sparrow felt quite annoyed at the bad manners of the Sapling, as it is an unwritten law of the woods that no tree shall ever object to a bird resting on it. But he hopped to the ground and answered as civilly as he could, "Pray do not concern yourself, I will go. But when you come to die, my poor little plant, I will return and remind you of your rudeness." With these words he flew away.

Now, Oaks live nearly as long as Sparrows. For three hundred years they grow greater and greater in strength and size; for another three hundred years they rest, living quietly where they stand, in all their glory; then for three hundred years they slowly grow old, their branches fall off, their bark decays, and they become at last mere dust.

This, therefore, is the life-story of the Sapling, and on the last day of its nine hundredth year the Sparrow reappeared in the forest. There was now not much of a clearing; what was left of the old Oak was surrounded by younger trees.

The Sparrow alighted by the dying tree and rolled about in the dust that had fallen from it. He ruffled up his feathers and had a real dust bath, as you may see his family doing in the summer-time.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

“ Do you remember me ? ” he said at last. “ Have you forgotten your rudeness to me, nine hundred years ago ? Now you are humbled to this dust, but I live on in my strength.”

Then shaking the dust out of his feathers he darted into the air and flew away.

THE OPTIMISTIC THRUSH

IT was the end of March; one of those mild uncertain days that are generally expected of fickle April rather than of her fiercer parent.

The havoc of a recent gale had left the ground strewn with broken twigs and branches, but spring airs were to be felt. A Thrush was singing lustily on the topmost twig of a tree. He was young and full of his own importance; spring was in his blood and palpitated in his song.

Under the stark trees walked St Peter. Stroking his long beard he stood and listened for a while to the bird, thinking of the tears of the world that are so often hid in laughter. The joy of living was in the Thrush's mellow notes, yet for all their piercing sweetness the good saint sighed a little, for so brief is happiness. Then he called to the Thrush, who rested from his singing as St Peter bade him 'Good-morrow.'

"Oh, good-morrow to you, Father," answered the bird, preening himself in the pale sunshine, "but I have no time to listen."

"Why, I pray you?" asked St Peter, curiously.

"I am busy, busy, busy," sang the Thrush, clearing

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

his throat. "I am busy making summer. To-day I am to be married, and to-morrow is my brother's wedding-day," and then he gave utterance to some marvellous trills.

St Peter looked up at the sky and watched for a few moments the white clouds racing across the ocean of blue, driven by a hidden wind that did not so much as sway the grass on the hill below. Then he turned from the glade, and as he went he prayed for Nature's children, who seemed to him so full of groundless hopes.

Toward evening, as the short day dimmed suddenly, the wind came sighing up through the forest, and in its wake was a patter of raindrops. Then followed the roar of a storm. At midnight the gale dropped as suddenly as it had arisen, and silently a fall of snow settled upon the bare trees and upon the ground beneath.

Huddled into a cleft in the lowest branch of an old oak the Thrush trembled in misery. He thought no more of love and marriage. Death—not love—hovered near, and the frost struck him to the heart as he shivered under his ruffled feathers.

In the morning St Peter passed that way again.

"Good-morrow, Brother," he said.

"Thank you," murmured the bird.

"What of the wedding?" asked St Peter.

THE OPTIMISTIC THRUSH

“To-day I am dying, and to-morrow my brother too will die,” returned the Thrush mournfully.

But at that moment, as if in answer to the Saint’s prayer, a shaft of sunlight glanced through the trees, lighting up the snow, while a tiny patch of blue sky showed through a rift in the clouds. Hope revived on the instant, and the Thrush raised his head. Then St Peter wandered on, and still it was upon the hopefulness of Nature’s little ones that he pondered.

But, alas! the Thrush had lost his youthful confidence and he boasts no longer that he will make summer. Instead, in the month of March he sings: “Socks and sandals, socks and sandals, for to-morrow it snows. Good socks of cloth, and stout sandals of leaves, for I go to my beloved. . . .”

So, as anyone may hear, he sings thus in the middle of his lay of welcome to spring when the weather is fair,¹ for he fears being overtaken by sudden winds and frost, and by a barrier of snow which will separate him and his bride.

¹ It is the missel-thrush or storm-cock which sings in spite of gales of wind and storms of rain.

THE KINGFISHER

LONG, long ago, when the Great Flood came and the waters covered the earth even to the tops of the highest mountain peaks, one of the strangest ships that ever were seen floated over the wild and solitary waste. Inside was Noah, the one righteous man, and his family, and two of every bird, beast, and reptile that inhabited the earth in those days.

Everybody knows the story of the Ark and how after many days the Dove was set free to fly away to give a sign for deliverance from the flood, and how she returned, not having been able to find even a twig upon which to perch.

After that, Noah called to him another bird clad in grey feathers, with a long sharp beak, broad wings, and a short little body, known as the King of Fishers.

"King of the Fishers," said Noah, "you are no stranger to water. Take wing, I entreat you, and see if deliverance is nigh, and whether a mountain-top is yet visible on which we can moor our craft. Return and bring me good news of the ebbing of the waters."

Thus saying, he opened a window, and the King-

THE KINGFISHER

fisher, poising for a moment over the friendly little ship, spread his strong grey wings, and flew off into the misty distance.

The day was dawning, and as the Flood began slowly to stay its strength, so the clouds, which for so many weeks had hung over the waters, began to roll back, and the rays of the glorious sun once again pierced through with welcome warmth. But suddenly, as if the elements would not yield without a last struggle, a terrific storm came on ; thunder and lightning raged in the heavens and hailstones rained hissing into the boiling waters below.

The Kingfisher, alone in his flight and terrified by the roar of wind and waters, darted upward. Strong on his wings after his long rest in the Ark he rose so quickly that he soon shot above the clouds into the calm of the sunlit skies beyond. So great was the contrast of the dazzling colour of this clear atmosphere with the gloomy wastes below, that his feathers, which, like the waters, were of a dull grey hue, changed to a brilliant azure, and ever since they have reflected the glorious blue of the untroubled sky.

Higher and higher he rose, revelling in the warmth and light, until at last he floated above the Sun itself, and saw it slowly rise to meet him. Unable to resist the longing to approach the wonderful orb yet nearer, he skimmed down into the rosy glow of dawn. But

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

he had forgotten that with the light came heat, and approaching too near to the dazzling blaze, his breast feathers were scorched until they flamed a glowing red.

The Kingfisher cried out with the pain and, turning, sped like an arrow to the now visible earth and into the dull cold waters of the Flood ; but although the flame was quenched and he recovered from his hurt, his breast feathers are still red from that burning kiss.

When the Kingfisher came again to the surface he remembered his mission, and looked around for the Ark. Alas, it was nowhere to be seen ! The Dove had set forth again, and had returned bearing an olive leaf in her beak, an emblem of hope to the voyagers. Noah forgot the Kingfisher in his rejoicing as the Ark grounded on the peak of Ararat, safe at last from the Flood.

The Kingfisher sought for the Ark on the surface of the waters, but did not dream that he should look for it this time on dry land. And even to-day we see him flying along the banks of rivers, and haunting lonely streams, always searching for the friendly Ark, or for his master's face. He loves to poise over deep clear pools, and to plunge into their depths, as if those he sought were hidden there. He flashes by like a streak of the blue sky with a ray of the Sun on his breast, but he utters a shrill cry as he flies, for he cannot find those he seeks.

TWO LITTLE STORIES OF THE WOODPECKER

GERTRUDE AND THE CAKE

LONG ago when our Lord dwelt in far-off Palestine He came one day to the cottage of an old woman named Gertrude who was busy making bread. She wore a red mutch (hood) on her head.

Peter, who was with Jesus, prayed the old woman for a morsel of bread to stay their hunger, for they had had little to eat for many hours.

Gertrude, with a surly air, pinched off a small lump of her rising dough, placed it on the board and rolled it into a cake for them. To her surprise when placed upon the griddle the dough grew and spread to its very edge !

She grudged giving so much to the strangers, so she took a still smaller portion of dough and rolled it out also, but the cake swelled as before, and she angrily refused to give it them, setting to work once again upon a tiny portion of dough so small that one could hardly see it.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

The result was the same—the dough rose and spread as before, until the griddle could not contain it.

At this Gertrude turned to her visitors. “ Since I cannot give you a small cake you must go without,” said she ; “ I will not give you one of these big loaves.”

Then Jesus was angry with the mean woman, and said : “ Thy love for Me is little if thou dost grudge Me a mouthful of food when I am spent with hunger ; so shalt thou be punished. Henceforth thou shalt be a bird, and ever seek thy food from bark and bole, and never shalt thou find a drop of water to drink, save when it rains.”

In a moment Gertrude was transformed into a great black Woodpecker, which flew up the chimney out of the cottage uttering shrill cries of fright.

And now to-day you will see her flying, black as the soot that smothered her in the chimney, still wearing her red hood on her head.¹ She taps away at the trees all day, seeking food, and she whistles loudly when the rain is coming, for she is always thirsty and longs for water to cool her tongue.

The main features of this story occur again and again in folk-lore. For example, the Cuckoo's mealy-coloured feathers are a relic of the days when he was the miller's

¹ In Norway the black red-crested woodpecker is called ‘ Gertrude's bird.’

STORIES OF THE WOODPECKER

man. When by the miracle the bread swelled, he nipped off bits, crying *Gukuk* (Look, look).

One legend has it that the baker became the Cuckoo because he refused to give our Lord's disciples bread, and his wife and six daughters who gave it secretly became the Seven Stars (Pleiades). So long as his song is heard, the Seven Stars are to be seen in the heavens.

Another version has the Owl for baker ; another the Lapwing for the old woman.

The Woodpecker was called by the Romans ' *Picus*,' from *pêlum* (a javelin or pestle). The noise made by the bill of the *Picus* tapping on the bark caused him to be adopted as the god of bakers, for in the old days baker and miller were one.

HOW THE WOODPECKER GOT HIS RED CREST

Once upon a time there lived a Sorcerer. He was the biggest, ugliest, blackest, and most ogrelike creature alive.

He lived on the top of a high mountain, and hated the world with a deadly hatred. When he breathed he sent over the land a fatal fever which not only killed men and beasts, but trees and grass, and little flowers withered away in the poisoned air.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

One day a young chief who lived in a far-distant country, and so had escaped the dreadful blast, decided that he would attempt to slay the monster in his cave.

He was a handsome youth, fair of face and stout of heart, and had fought valiantly for his people. Adventure and the love of fierce encounter spurred him on, and as he saw the desolation caused by the Enchanter he resolved all the more firmly to rid the world of the pest.

For many months he journeyed over continents and seas, until the snow-capped summits of a mountain range which cleft the sky told him that his journey was nearly at an end, and at last he climbed, with bow and spear in hand, to the steep cliff where the Sorcerer lived.

Reaching the yawning cavern in which he knew the terror lurked, the youthful warrior cautiously approached, then raised his sturdy bow and sent an arrow swift through the rocks, crying aloud his challenge, "Come forth, coward! Slayer of the innocent and helpless, fight if you dare!"

But the Magician replied, with a hoarse laugh, "One breath of my nostrils and you shall die, puny mortal!"

Another arrow followed the first, and without another word the creature angrily strode from his cave, breathing out pestilence.



THE WOODPECKER

STORIES OF THE WOODPECKER

Then ensued a combat worthy of giants. The young chief's arrows flew straight to their mark, but failed to penetrate the Sorcerer's coat of magic and dropped harmless to earth.

The Enchanter's evil breath burnt up the country round, but could not daunt so stout a heart.

Soon the youth was left with only three arrows and cried sadly, "What can I do? My arrows fail to pierce the magic armour, though my aim is true."

But the Sorcerer shouted once more to him to come to blows, and laughed to see him falter.

Suddenly the young warrior heard a bird calling from a tree near by, and looking up he espied a Woodpecker, who cried, "Aim not at body or at limb. Aim for the crest upon his head; thus only may you hope to wound and slay the evil fiend."

Grateful for the counsel, the hero again advanced, and bending his bow he loosed a shaft that all but tore his enemy's crest asunder. The Sorcerer gasped with dismay, and ere he could recover, another arrow sped and caught him fair and full in the centre of the feathered crest. Then he staggered and fell, his secret laid bare, his life's blood ebbing from the fatal wound.

"Die!" cried the hero, as he raised his mighty war-club. "No more shall mankind be afflicted and the land laid waste."

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Then he turned to the Woodpecker. "Green bird, I thank you for your timely help. Never shall men forget you." So saying, he dipped his finger in the Sorcerer's blood and touched the bird's small head.

On the instant a crest of blood-red flaming feathers appeared and the young man said, "Men will remember when they look on you that through your help the deed was done, and will befriend you through the ages."

And so the Woodpecker bears his crest and shows it proudly, for it is his crown of honour.

THE CYNICAL HOOPOE

KING SOLOMON, as every one knows, had a great many wives, and when he married a new one he would bestow upon her some gift that was different from any of the other presents he had given to former brides.

There came a day when he was rather at a loss as to what new gift he could find, and it was not until the very eve of his wedding that a likely idea occurred to him. He then remembered the cloud of birds that flew between himself and the burning sun of the East, forming a feathery arch that shaded him as he journeyed. Here was a wedding present indeed ; he would ask the birds to perform the same service for his bride.

Accordingly, he called them together, and addressing himself to their king, the Eagle, requested that from the day of his approaching marriage they would protect the new Queen as well as his own royal self from the Sun's fierce heat.

The Eagle talked over the matter with his subjects—more as a matter of form to show his importance than for any other reason. Then he told

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Solomon that they were willing to do as he had asked.

The wedding-day came and the birds escorted the bride to the marriage ceremony and were invited to the palace to pay their homage to the Queen, and receive her thanks. Each flew past the throne in turn, but King Solomon noticed that one of his favourites was missing. Calling the Eagle he asked him where the Hoopoe was, as he had not seen him among the other birds.

The Eagle looked uncomfortable and remained silent.

At last he said, "Your Majesty, the Hoopoe disappeared as soon as your royal request was made known."

"Why is that?" asked Solomon curiously. "The Hoopoe was the one who first thought of protecting us from the heat of the Sun."

"When we discussed your request his was the only voice raised against it, O King," was the reply. "He declared that he would not fly with us in the heat of the day to flatter any woman."

Solomon was so much amused at the independence of the Hoopoe that he almost forgot to be annoyed, much to the Eagle's relief. But he ordered a search to be made throughout the length and breadth of the land in order to discover where the Hoopoe had hidden himself.

THE CYNICAL HOOPOE

East, West, North and South flew the birds, but never a trace of the Hoopoe could they find ; but many months after a Cormorant spied him on an island in the most distant of the seven seas. He was hiding in a hole made in one of the rocks. In a moment the Cormorant summoned the flock and the crowd gathered on the island, until there was not an inch of room to spare, the sea birds, indeed, having to take to the water.

"Come out, O Hoopoe !" commanded the King of the Birds.

The Hoopoe looked out of his hole and sighed.

"A thousand to one, at least," he observed sadly.

"Quite true," said the Eagle. "Come out, Hoopoe."

"Well," said the Hoopoe, still keeping in his hole, "there's no way out of it that I can see. Return to King Solomon, whose foolishness in asking me to flatter the most worthless of creatures, I despise. But first I will open your eyes, you poor weak husbands," and forthwith he told the assembly three stories of women in general, and of King Solomon's wives in particular.

"When you find a good woman, you may be sure her virtues are the result of the stick," he concluded very solemnly.

There was a short silence. Even the Eagle was impressed, and the birds shifted from one leg to the other uneasily. Then they suddenly began to argue and no one could hear himself chirp, all trying to speak

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

at once. At last the Eagle quieted them, and addressed the Hoopoe.

“O Hoopoe,” he said majestically, “we consider your ideas are very helpful, and we think that if King Solomon knew what you have told us he might mend his ways and lessen the number of his wives. We will return to him, and will lay the matter before him, but you must go with us, in proof of your good faith.”

Then the Hoopoe crept out of his hole, and together the vast cloud of birds flew to Solomon’s palace, where they found the King and his newest bride side by side on their thrones, awaiting them.

The Eagle reported what he had heard to Solomon, who was so deeply interested that he sent his bride away, that he might listen in comfort to the three stories. When he had heard them he laughed till he could hardly sit on his throne; then, taking off his crown, he put it on the head of the Hoopoe. And the Hoopoe has worn it ever since.

The Hoopoe’s stories made so great an impression on Solomon that he never took another bride; but nobody knows what they were about, for *he* did not tell a soul, and the birds forgot them the very next day.

THE TRUTHFUL PARROT

ONE of these days your love of Truth will be your undoing," said the Magpie to the Parrot. "*I* never bandy words with *Her*; it doesn't pay."

The Parrot looked at him in a reproachful way. "I try not to say anything at all about *you*," he said anxiously.

But the Magpie roared with laughter. "You dear old curly beak," he cried. "I don't mind what you say about me! I'm a bad lot, and everybody knows it. Black's white and white's black as far as I am concerned, but it makes no odds to one's feathers anyway. Take care of yourself." And he flew off with a hoarse chuckle, steering his ungainly way over the tree tops.

The Parrot sadly watched him disappear. He took life very seriously as do most people when they set out to tell the truth. Every one liked him because he always meant what he said, but all said that his honesty would lead to trouble in this wicked world. He lived with a man who was a thief, and although he had never yet seen his master steal, the other birds knew that one

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

day he would be certain to discover the man's habits, and then the difficulties would begin.

Sure enough, no sooner had the Magpie left him than the Parrot saw his master lead an ox into the stable and proceed to cover over the stall with bracken and branches so as to hide the stolen property.

"What are you doing?" said the Parrot.

"Oh, nothing," answered his master. "I've just come across this ox and am keeping it warm for the night."

The bird thought no more about it, for he believed everything that was told him. But before long there came a great hammering on the door.

"Have you got my ox?" cried an angry voice, as one of the villagers burst in.

"Not I," said the thief. "Why should I have it?"

"Are you speaking the truth?" demanded the owner of the ox.

"Of course I am," said the man.

"Ask the Parrot," somebody suggested. "He can't help telling the truth."

"O Bird of Truth, has your master got an ox hidden in his shed?"

"Yes, he has," answered the Parrot without a moment's hesitation, remembering what he had seen.

The villagers were triumphant at this and said they would come back the next day to take the man off

THE TRUTHFUL PARROT

to prison, unless he could prove that the Parrot was lying.

The thief thought and thought, and at last hit upon a plan. In the middle of the night he put a great jar over the Parrot while it was asleep in the chimney corner. Then he poured water over the jar and hit it violently with a poker ; he did this for an hour or two, and then went to bed. But before morning he lifted the jar so quietly off the Parrot that he did not awake.

The next day the villagers reappeared to see what the thief had to say in his own defence.

“ The Parrot says you stole the ox,” said they. “ Prove to us that he does not tell the truth.”

“ Easily done,” said the man. “ He is no more a Bird of Truth than the Magpie. Ask him quite a simple question. Make him tell you what sort of a night it was, for instance.”

“ Was it a moonlight night, O Parrot ? ” they asked.

“ That it was not,” answered the Parrot promptly. “ I never heard such rain and thunder in my life. There was indeed a great storm.”

The men looked at each other. There had been no storm, of course ; the moon had been at the full, and the sky covered with countless stars.

“ Punish him,” they cried. “ Drive him from the village. We know now that he is a bird with a lying tongue.”

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

So they drove him out into the forest, and the thief got off scot-free.

As the Parrot was flying mournfully along he met a Mocking Bird, to whom he told the whole story.

“ Good gracious ! ” said that bird. “ You did not tell the truth, did you ? You should repeat what men say, as I do. They always think everything they say must be right. ”

“ Even if it’s false ? ” asked the puzzled Parrot.

“ Of course, ” laughed the other. “ As long as you repeat what they say they’ll think you are the cleverest bird alive. Take my advice and try. ”

Ever since, then the Parrot has been trying to repeat things after men, and if one succeeds better than another you will hear men say, “ What a *wonderfully* clever bird ! ”

THE KNIGHT AND THE NIGHTINGALE

A KNIGHT lay in a gloomy fortress on the borders of a great forest. There was no light in the dungeon except a little glimmer that came through a tiny shaft high up in the wall overlooking the waters of the moat. In this miserable place he could just see to eat the food which the jailer daily pushed through the iron grating in the door.

Sad at heart, the Knight pined through the dreary hours. One day a little brown bird hopped into the hole in the wall; opening his beak he poured out such a melody of song that the captive hardly let himself breathe for fear he should frighten the little stranger away. But, the song ended, the bird hopped into the dungeon, and peeping over the edge of the thick wall saw the prisoner lying far below. He flew to him, and perching on the rude table continued his song, his bright eye fixed upon him. Then the sound of footsteps along the passage was heard; he flew to the opening and so out into the sunshine.

Every day after this the Nightingale visited the

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Knight when he was alone, and he used to feed him with crumbs of his dry black bread.

At last, one day when he was feeling very sad and miserable, he said to him, "Sweet bird, I have given thee food this many a day, and thou hast cheered me in my unhappiness. Oh, remember how that thou art a creature of God, even as I am also, and help me in my great need. Save me from my misery if thou canst," and with a despairing cry the Knight hid his face in his hands, while the Nightingale flew silently away through the window.

He was gone for three long days and the captive began to think that he had frightened him away for ever ; but on the morning of the fourth day he came back to the dungeon carrying in his beak a precious stone which he laid down upon the table, quickly flying away once more.

The Knight was much surprised. He took the stone, turned it this way and that, and wondered how the Nightingale had meant to help him through this gift. Suddenly it slipped from his hand, and as he made a quick movement to prevent it rolling from the board, the stone touched the fetters on his wrist and on the instant they fell apart. The Knight, half-dazed, reached down and touched the anklets that held the chains on his legs, and they too answered to the talisman.

THE KNIGHT'S LITTLE FRIEND

He clasped his hands in a wild rush of hope and started toward the great locked door of the dungeon. At the magic touch of the stone the bolts slid back, the rusty lock turned silently, and the door swung back on its hinges. With one bound he was free, and he set off for the Emperor's palace.

But the keeper of the prison saw him run past the gates of the tower ; blowing on his horn three mighty blasts he roused the men of the fortress, and cried, " Ho ! the thief and rogue has fled ! Follow ! follow ! pursue we him all. . . ." and at their head he set out after the prisoner, who by this time was nearly at the palace gates.

Snatching a bow from a startled archer near by, the Knight turned and bent it with all his force and the shaft sped truly, striking the keeper of the prison so that he died without a groan. Thus the Knight checked the pursuit, and gaining the palace gates he threw himself on the mercy of the Emperor and so found forgiveness.

Upon his shield for ever after he bore as an emblem the figure of a little bird, a stone in its mouth, and, beneath, a great silver key upon a blood-red field.

THE GREEDY RAVEN

IN the beginning of time not only was the Black-bird white, but so also was the Raven. He was white when he was in the Ark with Noah, and the story of how he came to be black is a sad one. The misfortune was partly his own fault and partly Noah's, for no one should be so angry as Noah was on that occasion.

You remember how the Kingfisher left the Ark and changed colour as a result of his journey to the Sun, and how the Dove found the olive leaf. Perhaps you have also heard how badly the Magpie behaved when he would only perch on the roof and chatter at the drowning world.

The story of the Raven is not a very nice one, so I must try to tell it as quickly as I can.

You see he was such a very greedy bird. Early one morning he was sent by Noah to look out for land, and on his quest he saw the dead body of a horse floating on the waters. He settled upon the poor horse, and as there had not been much to eat in the Ark, he ate without stopping for three days and three nights. This was a horrible thing to do, and cannot



THE RAVEN

THE GREEDY RAVEN

possibly be excused. But so it was, and not until the fourth day did he remember his errand. He then started to return to the Ark, even then hardly troubling to look about for any mountain-top that might have appeared out of the Flood, so sleepy and well-fed was he feeling.

When Noah saw the Raven flapping lazily along he called to him quite kindly and said, "Why hast thou been away so long, O Raven? What is thy message, and how does the great world look?"

But the Raven had so over-eaten himself that he had a pain under his white feathers, and he answered rudely and abruptly, "I know not how the world looks. I was very hungry and I ate a dead horse."

Then Noah was furious. "Now may thy feathers turn as black as my heart within me, for thou hast betrayed thy trust," he cried.

And the bird turned as black as soot, for Noah's heart was black with rage.

"Because of thy greed, thou shalt feed on carrion for ever," Noah added.

This perhaps was hard on the poor bird, who had eaten the horse because he was hungry, but the decree has never been changed, and Ravens still feed on the bodies of dead animals.

Yet this was not all. In order that he and his family should not multiply too quickly his wife was compelled

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

by Noah's curse never to lay her eggs earlier than December, and she was forced to hatch them before the end of February, when the frost was so strong that it would split even stones in its iron grip. Only when the frost split open the shells could the young ravens get out, and then they had the bitter cold to face. Noah thought that if they were hatched in the spring they would grow more numerous than all other birds, and so made this decree. But in these latter days the Ravens, though black as ever, have evaded the frosty sentence, and they hatch their babies when they like.

Yet they have never forgiven Noah for losing his temper, and they nest on the highest mountain crags and on the sides of steep cliffs in order to avoid his descendants.

THE THIRSTY HERON

AT the Creation there were no wells or springs from which birds and animals could drink, and to quench their thirst they had only the rain which fell from the clouds.

But the day came when the rain-water was not enough for all. Families had multiplied, and consequently much more water was needed, and as the Sun grew hotter it dried up the pools so that they became smaller and smaller.

One summer things became very bad indeed ; no rain had fallen for a whole month, and the fierce heat of the Sun scorched the grass brown, and the rivers were almost running dry. The animals suffered greatly ; go where they would they could not find enough water to satisfy their thirst, and the birds flew far and wide in the same hopeless quest.

Then the Creator came to His creatures and said, " Listen, my children. Every one of you must dig, great and small alike, and water shall bubble up out of the earth for evermore ; there shall be enough for all."

Then the birds flew down to the ground. The

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Chickens ran to scratch with their tiny claws ; the Ostrich worked side by side with the Tom-tit, and the Elephant with the Hedgehog. Such a sight has not been seen before or since.

But alone of all the birds the Heron wandered about by himself, now stepping delicately over the ground, now with a scornful air flying over the heads of the diggers, or again standing silently on one leg idly watching the busy scene, as some philosopher might stand and gaze at ants working on their native hill.

Nobody paid much attention to him. Sweat was breaking out on the brow of the Badger, accustomed as he was to the job ; as for the Wood-pigeon and the Cuckoo, the laziest birds of all, they were breathless from their exertions, and the Hyenas and the Foxes were just as busy. The Robin, scratching away with his little thin legs at straws and leaves, was as good as any of them.

The figure of the Heron, standing aloof from the active workers, at last caught the Creator's eye.

" O Heron ! " He exclaimed. " Why dost thou not help in the work ? "

" Why should I ? " replied the Heron calmly. " The supply of rain-water is not yet dried up, and I object to soiling my beak or my feet until I must. For myself, I have water to drink. As to others, they must provide for themselves."

THE THIRSTY HERON

This selfish speech angered the Creator and He said sternly, " Because thou hast not obeyed My command, thou shalt drink only rain-water ; spring-water thou shalt not touch."

So it is that the Heron never lives far from marshy ground. He makes his home where rain-water has collected into a pond, and his nest is found in the highest trees near the clouds. In time of drought he may be heard crying sadly to the sky to send rain to cool his parched tongue. But the other birds no longer suffer from lack of water, for they have an abundant supply from the springs.

THE TAIL OF THE PEACOCK

ON her wedding-day the goddess Juno gave her lord, the mighty Jupiter, the golden apple that grew in the Garden of the Hesperides. This glowing fruit—forerunner of our orange—is remembered to-day when a bride wears a wreath of orange blossom.

Now Juno loved her husband, but she was not willing to give up to him a treasure which she valued very highly. This was none other than a Cow, no ordinary animal, as you will believe when I tell you that her eyes were a wonderful blue, her nose was soft as pink velvet, and her long tail was fringed like a pampas flower.

Jupiter longed to have this Cow, and Juno knew of his longing, but she was not anxious about it, for had she not Argus, the watchman with a hundred eyes, to guard her treasure night and day?

But Jupiter was accustomed to have all he wanted, and that at once, and if his wife begrudged him pleasure—well, so much the worse for her. So he sent for Mercury, his messenger, and told him that the Cow grazing in the distant meadow under the eyes of

THE TAIL OF THE PEACOCK

Argus was to be his ; Mercury must succeed in stealing it.

The messenger flew off, his winged feet carrying him swiftly over the plains and hills, until from behind a cloud over the deep flower-strewn meadow he saw the Cow watched by Argus, whose eyes were never all closed in sleep at the same time.

Mercury knew that he had been set a hard task ; but he had the gift of song, and when he sang even the gods paused to listen to him.

Argus saw Mercury approach but was not afraid ; if half his eyes grew heavy and forgetful, the other half would remain unwinking and steadfast, and he welcomed Mercury to brighten his lonely watch.

The messenger of the gods lifted his tuneful voice and made heavenly music. Even the Cow stopped chewing her cud and listened, one eye open, the silver bell round her neck soundless as she lay still. Argus laughed merrily at the cheerful songs and sighed over the sad ones, and then, with deep cunning, Mercury struck his lyre and played a lullaby that caused the very winds to sleep.

Gradually all but two of the watchman's eyes closed heavy lids, but these two would not even blink. So Mercury took a hollow reed and played a magic tune that caught in its notes the silence of the drowsy noon, the still faint humming of a bee, the flicker of the

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

fire-flies in the dusk, and the soft swoop of a bat by night.

The last two of Argus' eyelids drooped and the watchman slept. . . .

Then Mercury led away the dreaming Cow, and brought her to Jupiter.

As you will imagine, Juno was very angry at the theft. She summoned Argus and cried, "What good art thou as a watchman, for all thy hundred eyes? Even my Peacock is wiser than thou, for he with only two eyes can tell when he is looked at. I will take from thee and reward him ; let thine eyes be lamps in his tail for ever more, for thou art a faithless watcher."

Then straightway the hundred eyes of Argus appeared in the tail of the Peacock ; you can count them there yourself if you care to take the trouble.

THE CONCEITED PARTRIDGE

YOU will remember how at the beginning of the world the All-father painted the birds with wonderful colours out of His paint box, and how the Nightingale was late, and so was given a heavenly voice instead of glowing plumage.

Now the Partridge had been painted a lovely shade of red, which shone with golden lights in the sunshine, but she was a vain bird and, comparing herself with the Kingfisher and the Peacock, grumbled and made a good deal of fuss that she was not adorned like them.

At last the Creator heard of her discontent, and being willing to put things right for any of His creatures if they were unhappy, He sought out the Partridge and found her in a turnip field, looking more dissatisfied than ever.

“What is the matter?” asked the All-father kindly.

“I don’t like the colour of my feathers,” answered the bird fretfully.

“Why is that?” the Creator asked.

“Why indeed!” said the Partridge rudely. “Surely I might have been asked before I was made this rusty

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

colour. You might have known I can only wear blue. . . .”

Then the All-father was grieved at the impudence of the Partridge and determined to teach her a lesson. He stooped down and picking her up by the tail, threw her into a heap of ashes in a field near by. Then He went sorrowfully away.

The Partridge was dazed by her fall and struggled out of the ashes as best she could. When she recovered a little she looked hastily round to see if anyone had been a witness of her disgrace, but could see no one. She scrambled through the turnips and over a hedge down to the bank of the nearest stream, so that she could wash away the ashes that smothered her feathers.

She bent down and dipped her beak into the stream, trying to make the water trickle down her back so as to rid herself of the dust, but she only made matters worse. The wet ashes stuck to her beak and clung to her feathers, under her wings and along her sides, in the most distressing way.

Then the Partridge was sorry for her ingratitude and rudeness. She implored the All-father to forgive her, but though by this time His anger had passed He decided that the lesson should be one that the foolish bird should never forget, and so to this day her feathers are drab and mottled, the grey of the ashes mingling with the red of her former colour.

WHY THE CUCKOO HAS NO
TIME TO BUILD HER NEST,
AND WHY SHE FLIES SO
HEAVILY

The first cock of hay
Frights the Cuckoo away.

Lancashire Proverb

MORE stories are told of the Cuckoo than of any other bird, and she is very proud of this.

Long, long ago a Cuckoo came for the first time to Brittany and built a nest as fine as any other. She was naturally very pleased, as it was not every Cuckoo that could build a nest to equal a Magpie's; and, satisfied with her day's work, she rested in the fields in the cool of the June evening.

As she wandered over the young grass she thought very lovingly of St Gertrude, the patroness of love and beauty, whose breath is scented with the flowers of spring.

"I, like her, banish ice and snow, and bring the pearls of dew, and the birds of spring," said the

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Cuckoo to herself, as she hopped down into a cart-track to eat a slug she saw crawling there.

Alas for the happy Cuckoo ! She did not hear the creaking of a wagon of hay that was rolling along to the farm. In a moment one of the great wheels caught her, and before she could escape she was crippled for life. Now she flies heavily from tree to tree, and she leaves her summer home when the hay is ready for cutting.

But village maidens are sorry for the poor Cuckoo. In early spring when they hear her call they kiss their hands to her and ask, " Cuckoo, Cuckoo, when shall I be married ? " And old folk come to their cottage doors on an April evening and cry, " Cuckoo, Cuckoo, when shall I be freed from the cares of life ? "

When she hears these questions the Cuckoo answers with her call, once for each year which will pass before their wishes are fulfilled. And as some young girls live until they are quite old maids, and some old people do not die for many years, the Cuckoo's time is fully occupied calling out the numbers to them all.

Nesting-time goes by, and still she flies from tree to tree calling out the years. She is so busy that she has to lay her eggs as often as not in a Meadow Pipit's nest.

THE CURLEW AND THE SAINT

IT was very near the end of April as St Beuno strode over the moor toward Llanddroyn. His priest's habit was rolled about his waist as he breasted the steep mountainous Welsh slopes, keeping the setting sun on his left hand and making for the North, for he was accustomed to travel many miles on foot.

St Beuno was a holy man, but a long sojourn among the Britons who had been driven to the fastnesses of their own wild country by the Northern and again by the Southern invader, had made him silent and suspicious. The Welsh for the most part were unfriendly to him and he had made little progress in converting them to the true faith, the story of which he so untiringly tried to bring to their ears.

The legend has it that St Beuno used to pass across the narrow sea to the Isle of Anglesey on his holy mission, walking upon the water as he would walk over the heather. Whatever peril assailed him, he never lost sight of his precious book in which was

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

set down the sayings of the Master he served. Few were the manuscripts of those days, and his book was a treasure of untold price.

On the evening our story opens, St Beuno passed over the blue waters of the straits, as he had done many times before, and, book in hand, preached to the people of the island, imploring them to save their souls.

On the third day he returned to the shore and found that the wind blowing steadily across the land had troubled the waters, and that the waves rolling in from the Atlantic were like great green mountains, dashing themselves in a foaming mass on the rocky coast. St Beuno had long ago ceased to fear the elements, so once more tightly girding his frock and grasping his staff, he started to return to the Welsh hills, dimly blue in the distance.

He was safely across, but found on reaching land that he had lost his book—his precious and only possession ! It had been blown or dashed from under his arm by the wind or water.

The Saint was grievously troubled and he retraced his steps to the water's edge, searching the shingle and the rocks. He realized how unlikely it was that he would recover his treasure, for what could live in the boiling seas that swirled through the straits, least of all a little vellum book !

THE CURLEW AND THE SAINT

At length he turned toward the moorland with bent head and heavy heart, but as he did so he noticed a reddish-brown bird with a long curved beak and melancholy eye standing on one leg on a rock near by.

“Good evening to thee, Brother Curlew,” said St Beuno hastily. “Hast thou seen a book in these parts? With thy long beak thou mightest have picked it up easily enough. I have lost my only friend, and I know not what I shall do,” and the old man nearly wept.

The Curlew shifted from one leg to the other, and opening his long beak gave out a wild plaintive cry that the Saint knew was meant for sympathy; but he had no real hope that the bird had seen the book.

He was moving on sadly when the Curlew shifted to his other leg; once more the weird sad wail echoed over the moor and the bird rose from the rock into the air, wheeling and calling again and again.

Puzzled, the Saint looked round, first up, then down. There on the edge of the moor near the rock on which the Curlew had been sitting was the nest, made of a little dry grass with twigs of heather, but with no protection from unfriendly or unthinking man or beast. In the nest were four eggs of a greenish-brown colour with curious blotches and streaks upon them, and in the centre of the four lay the book!

St Beuno pounced on his treasure with a cry of joy,

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

and looking up called to the bird: "Brother Curlew, listen to me, listen to me. For this service thou hast rendered to God and to Holy Church, I will ask the Father to grant thee His especial protection. Moreover, thy children shall no longer live in fear, and thy senses shall be keener for their safety."

And from that day the Curlew ceased to lay her eggs where all could see them; of all the birds she hides them most carefully away.

But she still utters her shrill weird cry as she wings across the moorlands when the sun sets over the sea.

THE SWALLOW WHO WAS ONCE A WICKED MOTHER-IN-LAW

ONCE upon a time there lived a man whose mother lodged with him and his wife in the same house. Everybody knows that two women who love the same man seldom agree, and the man's mother was as jealous as only a jealous woman can be of her daughter-in-law. When her son was away from home she would treat the girl very cruelly and persecute her from morning to night, but the young wife never told her husband ; she knew he was fond of his mother, and she did not wish to shake his affection.

However, one day the ill-temper of the wicked mother-in-law got beyond control, and in a fit of passion she slew the girl most cruelly with a pair of scissors. But as she was gloating over her evil deed her son came in and saw her.

It was too late for the evil woman to escape. The husband was furious ; he seized her and bound her fast with cords, then piling up a great heap of wood and straw he set fire to it, and dragged her into the midst of the flames.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

The woman screamed out for mercy, but the man, mad with rage at what he had seen, turned his back and left her to her fate.

But St Mary, looking down from Heaven, saw the old woman's agony. Her tender heart was touched and she came down from the sky and drew her out of the flames. The woman's clothes were burning still, but the Saint changed her into a Swallow, and drew her up the chimney to the open air.

As soon as she felt she was safe, the wicked mother-in-law wanted to fly away, but Mary held her fast by the tip of one wing and said, "Stay, do not think that I have saved thy life only out of kindness of heart and pity for thee. Thou art a cruel woman and deservest to be punished. I shall put a sign on thee that every one may recognize the evil mother-in-law, and know that it was thou who slew thy son's wife."

Then she caused the Swallow's tail to be forked like the pair of scissors, or like two knives joined together and crossed at their points. This she did to remind men of the cruel deed.

Soot had fallen on the Swallow in the chimney, making her feathers black as they have ever since remained. On her breast gleams a red spot to remind her of the blood she had shed. The white feathers that she wears are all that remained unburnt of her

THE WICKED MOTHER-IN-LAW

clothing. They are not quite white ; they were singed a little in the fire.

And now the Swallow flies around the houses of men, bearing the tokens of St Mary's punishment ; but the houses under whose eaves she builds her nest are protected from fire, neither will they be struck by lightning unless Man kills the bird, and so is cruel in his turn.

HOW THE LONG-EARED OWL CAME BY HIS NAME

WHETHER or not Mr L.-E. Owl (not to be confused with his cousins with different initials, such as B., L., S.-E., T., and the rest ¹)—whether or not, I say, L.-E. does or does not build a nest of his own, nobody quite knows. It is probable that until the day he quarrelled with the Rat he used to live in holes in trees, as most Owls do. Be that as it may, it is certain that he prefers nowadays to rely on the judgment of other people, such as Crows or Magpies, when choosing a site, should he not be successful in finding a ready-built nest.

Before the Rat played him the trick of which you will hear, L.-E. had a nice round soft head with tiny ears, big orange-yellow eyes, a black beak, and a good temper.

Now his temper as well as his ears are different, and this is how it all happened.

One day the Rat climbed up L.-E.'s tree, crept into the hole, and stole out of it the store of food that had been carefully collected for the week-end. It was not

¹ Barn ; Little ; Short-eared ; Tawny.

THE LONG-EARED OWL

a very savoury collection, and I will not go into details, but the Rat ran up and down that tree at 'the double' while L.-E. was away hunting, and cleared every bit, supper included. The Owl was furious. He flew off to the Rat's hole in the bank and threatened to kill him even if he had to wait there for a week before he came out.

But creeping to the edge of the hole the Rat said he was very, very sorry, and he looked up with his beady black eyes in a most humble way. Then he offered L.-E. a gimlet and told him he would get far more pleasure out of it than from eating any dead nestling.

"A gimlet is a wonderful thing," he said; "you must stick it point upward in the ground at the bottom of your tree and then slide from the very top down the trunk on to the point as quickly as you can. My family love doing it," the Rat added, pretending with the tip of his tail to whisk away a tear in sorrow for the trick he had played on the Owl. The Owl was pleased to feel that the Rat was giving up something he really liked, and took the gimlet, flying off without another word.

He set up the gimlet quietly as the Rat had told him to do, slid down the tree very fast, and—stuck on the spike!

It was by the greatest good fortune that his feathers were so thick. They acted as a sort of mat and the

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

horrid gimlet did not go in so very far after all. He might quite easily have been terribly injured, to say nothing of the risk of being killed, and he was in such a rage with the Rat for the second trick played upon him that he sat on the root of the tree and shut his eyes for quite a long time, afraid of what he might do in such a temper. Then on noiseless wings he flew off to the hole in the bank where the Rat lived, and ordered him to come out.

Now the Rat was a very cunning fellow, as are all his family to-day. He had not really meant to do the Owl an injury, and only wanted to make him lose his temper. He had long ago decided how to act when the Owl became enraged at the trick (as of course he knew he would be), and his black eyes looked up impudently out of his hole at the summons.

He waited until the Owl had called him all the names he could think of, and then appeared to be very contrite.

"I am sorry, friend," he said in a penitent voice. "I was joking and never dreamt you would think that I meant what I said! I thought you would know that the toy was just the thing to use for hollowing out a hole in a tree. I really must try and stop my tongue from running away with me. . . . Just to think how sore you must be, goodness me!" and he curled his tail over his whiskers to hide a smile.

THE LONG-EARED OWL

But the Owl continued to glare and to look very angry, so the Rat politely begged his pardon over again and said that he had something to show him.

"What is it?" snapped the Owl. "An air cushion, I suppose."

"Oh no, dear friend," smiled the rascal, "it is a wonderful new feather cap that I picked up for a mere song from a Tit only yesterday morning."

Still suspecting a trap, the Owl only ruffled his feathers; but all the same, there was a gleam of curiosity in his eyes which the Rat quickly noted.

"May I show it you?" he insisted, and before the Owl could say "No" out came a most charming little feather cap, with two tufts of feathers sticking up on either side. "So smart," smiled the Rat, giving it a shake. "Come, let us be friends. Bend down and I will put it on your head."

And this time he really was sincere, and he put the cap on the Owl's head so that the tufts stood up like flags, and led him by the claw to the water's edge to look at his reflection.

The old Owl was as vain as a Peacock and could not resist the bribe, so he quite forgave the Rat. He has worn the cap ever since, though some people think it is nothing but a pair of very long ears.

The Rat took back the gimlet; with it he bores a hole into anything that gets in his way.

WINGED BURDENS

STROLLING together on the sea shore were a Puffin and a Heron. One was long, the other short of leg, and the Heron reached his long neck down to the Puffin, who now and again stood on tip-toe to hear what his companion said.

"I like this quiet life," the Heron was saying. "It suits me down to the water. There is plenty to do, what with nest-building and fishing and so on, though I must say I don't much care for living on the marshes. Damp, you know, and my wife feels it in her legs."

The Puffin, who at the moment had been standing on the very tips of his large webbed toes, nodded agreement.

"I often long to get further out to sea," he said wistfully. "I swim a good deal, of course, but it's slow work. I always feel as if I ought to be able to go further afield than the Oyster-catchers. But in the long swim we come out about level; it's only a question of time."

"Swimming and travelling rather bore me," responded the Heron. "I like thinking; there's always

WINGED BURDENS

such a lot to think about. But I shouldn't mind a view from the top of those trees in the evenings "

The Puffin lost most of this remark and waddled along in silence.

Just then they met a Sandpiper coming toward them as fast as she could lay claw to the sand.

"Heron!" she gasped. "O Puffin, what do you think! The Creator has called a Council. It's to be at five o'clock to-morrow morning in the usual place. Robin says he thinks it's something very important."

The Heron and Puffin glanced at each other. One looked up, the other down.

"Dear me, we must be off," they exclaimed. And forgetting to thank the Sandpiper for her news they started home to their families, the Heron stalking so rapidly over the ground that the Puffin found it difficult to keep up with him.

There was no such thing as flying in those days; every creature from a Spider to an Eagle walked on his own flat feet.

There was very little sleep that night. For one thing, no one trusted the Cocks, who crowed more or less when the spirit moved them and might forget to crow at all at five o'clock.

Consequently no one was late for the great occasion. The Sun was just peeping out from behind a low cloud

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

and a shaft of light danced upon the waves as the birds assembled on the slopes of a hill. The Creator faced them with His back to the Sea, and all strained their ears to hear what He had to announce.

He told the assembly that He had been watching His children as they worked and played and was made happy by what He had seen. Already the Robin was the friend of Man, the Starling of the Sheep, and the Cock and Hen of the Farmer. The Seagull, He had observed, watched over the souls of Men.

With few exceptions (the Magpies and Sparrows blushed) the birds were kind and helpful to each other. But there was one favour He wished to ask of all. "I have called you together to-day," He said, "to ask you all to unite and share the burden of sorrow that may press hardly upon some of your number in the days that are coming. It will lie heavy on the Lark, whose tiny limbs cruel men will seize in gluttony; on the Plover, whose eggs will be stolen before they are hatched; on the gaily-coloured birds, whose feathers will be sought after by vain and heartless women. Will you all take up the burden of the sorrowful, and by so doing help to ease their pain?"

The Creator paused, as if expecting a reply, but there was a great silence. From a distance it appeared as though the birds were quite still, but the Creator saw that the whole assembly had moved a

WINGED BURDENS

full pace nearer to Him. Each bird, by a common impulse, had stepped forward at the same moment, and so noiseless was the motion that only the keenest eye would have noticed it.

“ Ah, thank you, My children,” the Creator said, stretching out His hands. “ Take up, each one of you your burden, and it shall be fastened upon your shoulders ; as you bear it so shall it bear you.”

And as the birds turned to look at the slopes of the hills they saw little glistening heaps. These, they found, were the burdens that they were to carry. Each was made of feathers the colour and size of the bird for which it was intended, and silently and quickly each shouldered its load.

But as they turned to walk homeward, they found that they were lifted off their feet, and they floated in the air, higher and higher, up to the sky toward the Sun.

For their burdens had become wings, and thus flight came to the world.

And nowadays only a few birds remember how to walk ; the Penguin does, and so too does the Black-bird when he is in a hurry.

WHY THE COCK CAN FLY NO HIGHER THAN THE STABLE DOOR

WHEN the Cock lived in the sky he was a very splendid creature indeed. His wings were nearly as powerful as those of the Eagle and his legs were not nearly so long as they are now, but, as is the case with so many, his disobedience was his undoing, as you shall hear.

There came a day when the Creator sent him down to Earth to see whether all was going well, and to report upon matters there as soon as he returned.

He was told not to stay below long as there was other work for him to do, and the Cock promised that he would lose no time upon the journey.

He flew off through the mists and clouds that veiled the Earth and found himself flying low over the sea toward a land on which the sun was shining. There were green hills and rivers and shady trees waiting to be explored, and he felt that he had never seen anything so wonderful in his life. He flew through the great forests and drank from the streams and pools



THE COCK

WHY THE COCK CANNOT FLY

that were there. He passed over moorlands and across bleak cliffs and high mountains, and finally came to a village where children were playing and cows and horses grazed in the green fields.

"This is a wonderful place," thought he, as he gobbled up some corn in a farm-yard; so pleased was he with the farm that he forgot his promise to return to the sky, and stayed on making friends with the animals around him.

Early one morning as he awoke and crowed to show how happy he was, the Sun, who was peeping over the sea, gave him a wink.

"There's trouble afoot," said the Sun, and straight-way hid behind a cloud for the rest of the day.

Then the Cock remembered his promise, and at once resolved to fly heavenward. Alas! his wings would not bear him. . . . His legs had grown longer during his walks about the fields and meadows, he found that his wings had lost their power, and he fell back after rising only a few feet from the ground. He scrambled up a hay-stack and tried to fly off from there, but he soon came back to earth again. Then he knew that he had disobeyed the Creator; never again would he be able to fly in the upper air.

And to this day you see the Cock making little jumps as he crows and flaps his wings on the top of the stable door, trying vainly to regain his lost power of flight.

THE RESTLESS CUCKOOS

IN a village on the edge of a great forest there lived a man and his wife who were very poor. Work was difficult to obtain, the cost of food was high, and children were hungry creatures to feed. One evening, when the man had been idle for some time and at last had only enough money left for one day's food, he and his wife sat and looked at each other in silence.

At last the husband broke out: "It is no good sitting here, my dear. What is the use of watching each other die of hunger? I will go out beyond the village to look for work and food. If I stay here I shall die; if I go I *may* die, so at the worst there is nothing to risk."

But his wife cried out, "Oh, do not leave me and four children for many days! Without you there is none to protect us, and we cannot live long, even if there is not your mouth to fill."

Without another word the man rose, and taking an axe opened the cottage door and strode out into the night, and the poor woman was left alone by the empty hearth.

THE RESTLESS CUCKOOS

When morning dawned the husband found himself in a thick glade. He had walked all night along one of the sandy paths that led straight from the village into the forest, and he looked about him for a grassy place on which he could lie down. A few nuts and berries were all he had found for his morning meal, and thinking he would light a little fire under a spreading oak, he loosened his axe from his belt and raised it to cut off a branch or two from a little bush that stood near. Its twigs grew an equal length from the stem and they were covered with shining leaves.

To his amazement, as the forester raised his arm the bush suddenly bent toward him and began to speak. "Stop!" it cried. "Do not harm me! I will do you great service if you lower your axe, my good man."

"Do me service!" exclaimed the astonished peasant. "What good can you do me, I should like to know? Why you have not even any berries that will serve to stay my hunger!"

"Do as I tell you," said the bush, "and you will have no need to think of hunger. Go back to your village. When you arrive there you will be appointed head man, and your wife and children will be clothed and fed."

"Well," said the man, half to himself, "I lose nothing if I return, and there must be something

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

wonderful about a bush that can speak in the language of men. But if I am worse off when I get home instead of better—— ” and he looked fiercely at the bush and fingered his axe.

Returning along the sandy path he at length arrived at the outskirts of the village, and there to his surprise he found his wife awaiting him. “ I knew you would come,” she cried, running to meet him. “ Just think, they have chosen you to be head man, and we shall never be poor again. Come quickly,” and she dragged him to the place where the villagers were waiting his return.

Sure enough, the peasant was made head man of the village, and for three whole years he and his family enjoyed peace and plenty. Then, without warning, another man was appointed to his place, and there he was as poor as ever he had been in the old days.

But this time he was not without hope, and remembering the shining bush he went again to the forest, and again he received the same advice and returned hopefully to the village. This time he was appointed judge over the people. He was sent to a small town some miles to the west and he lived there with his family in even greater comfort. Again when three years were up another man was put in his place, and once more he went into the forest to consult the little bush.

THE RESTLESS CUCKOOS

Even better fortune was in store for him ; he was chosen Emperor over a great country for a term of three years, for by the law of the land no man could be Emperor for a longer period. By the end of his term he had learned wisdom and had saved enough of his riches to feel assured that he would never sink back into poverty.

But his wife meantime had become exceedingly proud and ambitious. Angry at the thought of another succeeding her as Empress, she gave her husband no peace, but continually insisted that he must go back to the bush again to ask that he should be given another term of office.

At last, very unwillingly, he consented, and disguising himself as a peasant he went into the forest at nightfall.

“ Why are you here again ? ” demanded the bush, before he had time to speak. “ You are not in want of anything, and have no business to ask further favours.”

“ It is my wife who has made me come to you again, O Bush,” said the unhappy man.

“ Miserable creature,” replied the bush angrily. “ I made you head man, then judge, and even the gift of an empire did not satisfy you. You shall be punished for your greed. From to-day, you and your ungrateful wife shall be as birds, never at peace, but always

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

restless and dissatisfied ; you shall fly from tree to tree, from branch to branch, and from country to country, with neither home nor nest. Cuckoos that you have been, Cuckoos shall you remain."

And to this day Cuckoos are so poor that they choose all sorts of different nests in which to have their children reared—from Pipits' to Warblers'—and are never satisfied.

THE UNGRATEFUL TOM-TIT

A STORK and his wife once lived in a nest at the top of a tall tree. The nest was very comfortable, and the Storks were very good parents, but, alas ! not a single nestling could they rear, hatch they ever so carefully.

One day Father Stork was walking gloomily along the river bank when he noticed a Tom-tit on the ground near-by. It was so small that the big bird was on the point of gobbling it up, thinking it was a Frog, when it chirped trustfully up at him. He then looked closely down his long beak and was puzzled. Here was a creature that had tiny wings and a beak ; it was evidently a bird and not a Frog. And yet, how came it to be so small ? It must be a baby Stork which had fallen out of a nest, he decided, standing first on one leg and then on the other, as he always did when he was in doubt. So he picked up the tiny creature and carried it gently home to his wife.

Mrs Stork was overjoyed, and welcomed the little stranger with open beak. Together they fed him carefully, Father Stork flying miles for worms every day. But although the nestling ate all that was brought to

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

him, much to the surprise of his foster-parents, who were most uneasy about it, he grew no bigger. However, there he was, not much taller than a Frog, and they had to put up with it. For his part, he was quite willing to be treated as a child if this ensured ease and plenty without effort from himself.

There came a day when a storm broke over the countryside. Rain and hail, driven by a fierce wind, swept through the trees, and to protect the Tit, Father Stork tucked him under his wing, and took shelter beneath a large tree. There was a hole in the trunk of the tree level with the top of the Stork's head and the Tit slipped into it.

"What dreadful weather," said the old bird presently. "I don't think I have ever known such a storm."

"What," piped the Tit, poking his head out of the hole, "you don't call *this* a bad storm, surely? You should have seen the storm when the red snow fell."

"Be quiet, child," said the Stork. "Do not boast. You have never seen anything of the kind."

"Indeed I have," replied the Tit. "I can remember that storm perfectly, although it was so long ago."

The Stork looked sternly at the Tit. Here was this youngster talking of a year which only a full-grown bird could remember. Then seeing the Tit laugh, he realized in a flash that he had been deceived all this

THE UNGRATEFUL TOM-TIT

time, and that when he was picked up the Tit was already full-grown.

“ You little wretch,” the Stork cried, “ you have been deceiving me and my poor wife for months past ! ” And he made an angry thrust into the hollow and spiked the ungrateful Tit on the end of his beak.

WHY THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS BETTER THAN THE DOVE

THE Nightingale had been telling the Dove the story of his adventure with the vine. One night in a southern land, he said, he had slept on a vine and had dreamt far on into the morning ; when he awoke his feet were held fast by the clinging tendrils and he only escaped with the greatest difficulty.¹

The Dove was greatly interested in the tale, but refused to believe the Nightingale when he went on to boast that never again had he overslept himself.

“ Nonsense,” she said ; “ nobody can keep away sleep if sleep wants to close his eyes ! ”

“ You are wrong,” protested the Nightingale. “ Anyway, let us prove who is right ; you know the one song I can sing, and I know yours. Let us keep awake to-night and learn some new tunes ; you will be able to judge whether I can drive off sleep if I wish ! ”

¹ This story adds that from the time the vine begins to shoot the nightingale never closes his eyes at night, but cries to the vine-dresser, “ *Taille vite, taille vite, que je puisse dormir.* ”

THE NIGHTINGALE'S SONG

The Dove agreed, and that night they perched on different trees in the same meadow.

The Nightingale stayed awake and listened to the sounds borne on the night air. Over the fields came the melancholy bark of a dog; the wind himself sighed a lullaby, but the melody of a shepherd's pipe on the hillside, the bleating of new-born lambs, the ripple of the river, and the twitter of a sleepy bird made even sweeter music to the listener.

Altogether he learnt twelve new tunes, and softly under his breath he wove them together into a wonderful new song.

But the Dove went to sleep almost at once, and did not awake until the dawn broke, when all was very quiet. As she listened, she heard the farmer getting out his team, chirruping to the great horses as he drove them to the uplands, "*Chirrup, chirrup, trr, trr,*" he called, and this the Dove remembered.

When the sun was up the Nightingale flew across to her.

"Well," said he, "I have had a wonderful night! Twelve new tunes have I learned, and I will sing them all to you." With that he opened his little beak, and out flowed the most glorious song that has ever been heard.

The Dove was very humble. She confessed that sleep had overcome her, and that she had learned only

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

one little note. And *Coo, coo*, she sings to herself in the daytime after the Nightingale has poured out his songs throughout the night.¹ But sometimes she sings *Trr, trr*, when she remembers the cheerful carter.

¹ Popular tradition has it that nightingales sing at night only, but we know that they sing just as much in the daytime, though unnoticed in the general chorus.

THE RAVEN WHO TRIED TO WALK LIKE THE DOVE

THERE once lived a Raven who was very, very old ; his father had not died until he was ninety-five, and his grandfather had lived to be a hundred, so it is not at all surprising that the Raven was ninety years old himself. But however that may be, he was very proud of the fact.

All his life he had been great friends with the Doves, who liked him for the stories he used to tell about his ancestors, the two Ravens of Odin,¹ and of the Ravens who guided the fleets of the Norsemen out to sea.² They would sit beside him and listen to every word, which gradually made him very conceited.

As the bird grew yet older, year by year, he became more vain concerning his personal appearance, lamenting that his feathers were no longer

¹ Odin had two ravens—Mind and Memory—whom he sent over the world to gather news ; on their return they would sit on his shoulders and tell him what they had discovered.

² When embarking on their voyages the Vikings used to let loose a raven and steer by his flight.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

white,¹ and that he was not so nimble in his flight as he used to be.

One day, when sitting hunched up on a tree, he saw a young Dove fly past and alight on the ground to peck at some grains of corn that were scattered there.

She trod so carefully and so delicately over the grass, her little pink toes pattering along without disturbing a leaf, that the old Raven watching her was filled with envy.

"Oh, how I wish I could step like that," he sighed. "She is so graceful, and I so clumsy! I will try . . ." and he flew heavily into a meadow, where he tried to walk prettily like the Dove.

But he found it was far harder than it looked. His ungainly claws caught in each other again and again, and several times he rolled head over heels and nearly broke his old bones. Soon there was a crowd of birds watching the performance, and they perched twittering with amusement in the surrounding trees, until at last they burst into peals of laughter.

"O Corbie, Corbie," they cried, holding their sides.

¹ Fable has it that the raven originally had white feathers, which he kept clean by constant washing in a stream. One day the Holy Child came to drink of the water and the bird splashed so rudely that He was prevented from quenching His thirst. Turning to the unkind raven He said, "Ungrateful bird! your feathers, of which you are so proud, from this day forth shall become black." And so they remain to this day.

THE RAVEN AND THE DOVE

“ Whatever are you trying to do ? Are you trying to dig another hole to bury *yourself* in this time ? ” ¹

The old Raven looked up, and seeing all the birds laughing at him, he felt very much ashamed. Sadly he turned away and said, “ I have been very foolish. I will return to my former walk,” and he went off by himself with all the dignity he could command.

But, alas, he could not walk even as he used to do ! In trying to imitate another he had forgotten his own step, and ever since he goes haltingly, with half a step and half a jump, even more clumsily than when the foolish thought of imitating the Dove first entered his head.

¹ According to the Koran, one raven killed another in the presence of Cain and then dug a hole to bury it in, to show Cain what he should do with the body of Abel.

THE MAGPIES AND THE RIVER OF STARS¹

ALMOST the only good thing we hear of Magpies is that they build nests with roofs, which long ago were the envy of the whole feathered world.

But they have something else to be proud of, for once every year they spend a whole long day in performing a kind and unselfish action.

This great occasion is on the seventh day of the seventh month. It is quite easy to find this in any calendar. On that day not a single Magpie should be seen flying over fields or heard chattering in tree tops. They should all be away—far away by the River of Stars, high up in the heavens.

It is only at night, after the sun has dipped behind the hill and the stars gleam in the darkened sky, that you can see this river ; even then you will not see it until the Great and Little Bears are twinkling at you, and Cassiopeia and Orion are flashing at each other.

¹ There is a Japanese legend which is closely similar. It varies only in regard to the lover, who in the Japanese story is a herdsman who incurs the wrath of the king because he allows his ox to stray in the heavenly pastures while he is conducting his wooing.

THE RIVER OF STARS

The Milky Way, as the river is sometimes called, divides the North from the South, and once a year—that seventh day of the seventh month—the Magpies gather to make a bridge across it for the sake of two lovers.

Once upon a time the King of Starland had a beautiful daughter. Not only was she lovely as a star to look upon, but she was good and clever; there was never a thing she could not do more gracefully than other maidens, and above all she could spin wonderful cloud garments at her loom.

Of course the King, her father, loved her above all that he possessed, and it was seldom that he refused her slightest wish. Thus, when a young and handsome Prince fell in love with her and wanted to marry her, the King did not, like many fairy-tale fathers, refuse his consent; he agreed at once to the marriage and gave his daughter a royal wedding.

The Princess was very happy in the new home to which the Prince took her and she grew more beautiful every day. She loved her husband so dearly that she spared no effort to please him.

But, alas! the Prince became lazy and selfish, as people are apt to do who have everything made easy for them; he wasted his money and even his wife's dowry; he gambled away his lands, and finally became so poor that he had hardly anything left.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

Then the Princess pleaded with her father, and again and again the King of the Stars paid the young man's debts. But still the Prince went on in his evil ways, until at last the old King became very angry and vowed he would help him no longer. He banished the Prince six months' journey from the north side of the heavenly river, and he told the Princess that henceforth she must live at the same distance from the south side of the starry stream. But the sight of her falling tears moved his heart, and he decreed that each year, on the seventh night of the seventh moon, the lovers might see each other for a few hours.

Sadly the Prince and Princess took leave of each other, to begin their sorrowful journey. The Prince now realized that all this sorrow that had come upon them was due to his evil living ; but, alas ! it was too late, even for repentance. They travelled for six weary months, and on the last day each reached the place of banishment. But they could not rest a moment, and turning round began to journey back as fast as they could. Another six months passed before each reached the brink of the River of Stars, and looking across could see the other in the pale light.

But the river could not be crossed. All the lovers could do was to wave sadly to each other, and kiss their hands in an agony of longing. And seeing their unhappiness the King forgave a little more, and de-

184

THE RIVER OF STARS

creed that they need not travel again those long, weary miles apart, but might rest near the great river, and, as the clouds swept by, catch glimpses of each other across the barrier that divided them. And there you may see them on a clear night—two bright stars—one on either side of the Milky Way.

But the lovers, though grateful to the King for his boon, could not hold back their tears when they realized that they might not meet ; and their tears streamed to the earth, deluging the fields, swelling the rivers, and washing away trees and houses in the flood.

Now birds are very tender-hearted, and they held a meeting to decide how they could best help the poor sad stars by the heavenly river. There was much twittering, but to the surprise of all, the Magpies were the first to offer practical help. Nor did they stay for further debate, but at once assembled in countless numbers. Then, circling several times over the tree-tops, they set out in a great black and white mass to the River of Stars, where on either bank stood the Prince and the Princess, weeping because of their separation.

Without further ado the Magpies closed up tightly together, head to head, and with fluttering wings poised themselves over the mighty stream, so that a wonderful white bridge gleamed before the Prince, inviting him to cross to his wife. Before ten minutes had passed, over he went with his horses and mules,

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

his servants and his baggage, and still the swaying bridge of Magpies hung over the river.

But the lovers might only be together for one short night, and on the following morning the Prince recrossed the living bridge, now quivering with fatigue, to live alone across the dividing starry waters for another year.

Then the tired Magpies flew homeward, their heads bare and black from the trampling of the many feet.

Every year throughout the long centuries the Magpies have flown to the heavens to make their bridge ; and although the Princess and the Prince may be together only the one night in each year, this joy is theirs for ever and ever.

No Magpie may shirk his duty at the bridge, and woe betide any truants seen on earth on that seventh day. Even the children fling stones at them.

And the people of the East watch the sky closely on the seventh day of the seventh month. If raindrops are falling at dawn they know that the lovers are shedding tears of joy because their happy time together approaches. If there are showers in the afternoon, they are sad to think that the lovers weep because they must say farewell. And sometimes they hear the thunder of waggons rolling through the sky and see the flash of burnished wheels as the royal retinue follows the Prince, its master.

THE GRATEFUL SPARROWS

FAR away in the East, where the sun shines hot on the golden melons in the gardens, people plant vines which climb over the walls of their houses, and they grow syringa beside their doors.

Hidden away behind the leaves of the vines Sparrows have their nests, and here they would live happily enough, were it not for the cruel snakes that haunt the roofs and snatch the tiny birds from the nests before they are ready to fly. All birds are frightened of snakes, but when a mother Sparrow cries out that her nestlings are in danger, very often a bigger bird will dart to the rescue swift as a falling arrow, and peck and peck at the snake, until, with the help of others which come quickly to his aid, he drives it away.

This is what happened on the summer's day I am going to tell you about. But when the snake had been driven off, the baby Sparrow it had tried to catch was so frightened, that it fell from the nest in the vine and lay helpless on the veranda of the house, its little leg broken.

Luckily the man who lived in the house was very

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

fond of birds. He picked up the little Sparrow and carried it tenderly indoors ; then he carefully set the leg, and put damp clay round it, and wrapped it up so that when the clay had hardened it was quite stiff, and could not move and get bad again.

The man fed the Sparrow and looked after it every day, and Mother and Father Sparrow would come and talk to their nestling when they thought no one was looking, and perch close to the bars of its cage.

At last, one beautiful morning the man opened the cage door, and lifting the little bird gently in his hand he took off the bandages and the clay, and there was the leg as perfect as the other. Then he held out his hand very high over his head, and the Sparrow fluttered up to its family in the vine, where it loudly twittered a song of thankfulness. Then it flew away to the King of Sparrow Land and told him the story.

The King and his courtiers at once put their beaks together and held a council. They decided that such a friend must be rewarded, and off went the Court, headed by the King, to the royal storehouses. They chose every kind of gift that they thought Man likes best : wonderful jewels and gold, rich raiment and silks, horses and coaches, wine and luscious fruits and flowers, pretty maidens to wait upon him, and oxen to drag the treasure with their broad shoulders.

You would have thought that such gifts would have

188

THE GRATEFUL SPARROWS

needed many bales and boxes, to say nothing of the beasts of burden. But in the twinkling of an eye everything was packed into a tiny seed, even to the tip of the tail of the last horse, and off flew the little Sparrow with the precious seed in its beak to the kind man who had healed its leg. The courtiers bade it be very careful not to lose the seed, and to give it to the right person, but the Sparrow was not likely to make a mistake as to that.

Down from Sparrow Land it flew, straight to the veranda it knew so well. It then set up such a chirping that the man came out to see what it was all about.

The Sparrow flew to him, dropped the seed into the palm of his hand, and tried to tell him what a wonderful gift it had brought. But the man did not understand the language of Sparrows ; he only smiled at his little friend's excitement, and took the seed away to show to his wife before he threw it away.

Now, his wife was a wise woman. She advised her husband to keep the seed, and when the next spring came round she herself planted it at the side of the house near the syringas. It soon sprouted, and grew to be a great vine that covered the entire wall, and from it hung wonderful yellow gourds, which the man wanted to pick.

There was one particularly golden gourd, far bigger and more beautiful than the others, and the wise wife

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

persuaded her husband to keep this until the autumn, when it would be fully ripe.

One great day together they cut off the gourd, now so big and heavy that they could hardly lift it, and then they cut it open with a great saw.

What was their amazement when, instead of the juice and seeds which they expected, there came forth wonderful treasures of which they had never even dreamed.

A jewelled table was the first thing to appear. Then a bottle of deep red wine and priceless golden goblets arranged themselves upon the green jade top of the table. After that a tea-caddy filled with fragrant tea-leaves came out; then followed silks, brocades, muslins, and the richest clothing of all kinds, and gorgeous foods fit for an emperor in his palace. Looking out of the window the man and his wife saw splendid teams of oxen and horses in the yard, and before they had time to look round again the room was full of lovely maidens ready to wait upon them and amuse them for as long as they liked.

While all this was going on, the Sparrow was peeping round the edge of a big vine leaf, delighted at the surprise and the pleasure of its good friend.

Small wonder was it that the man and his wife lived happily ever after, with everything they could wish, and enough money to do just as they liked.

THE GRATEFUL SPARROWS

And not a single snake was allowed to live on their roof.

Now, not far away there lived a cruel man who was jealous of the good fortune that had befallen his neighbours. One day he threw a stone at a Sparrow and broke its leg. He took the bird and tied up its leg roughly with clay and a rag. The leg mended, but it was crooked for ever afterward, and the poor little bird flew away as soon as it was able, thankful to have escaped alive.

Of course it went to the King of the Sparrows and told its story, for all good Sparrows have to do this when there is anything interesting to report, and in due course it was given a seed to take back to earth. The old man was waiting impatiently for the bird ; he snatched the seed, hobbled off into his garden without a word of thanks, and planted the seed immediately.

Everything happened as in the first story. A vine sprung up and climbed over the wall of his cottage, and when the gourds had begun to ripen they were even finer than his neighbour's, and gleamed with a rich golden colour in the sunshine.

At last, one autumn day, the man sat down greedily on his veranda, took a huge knife and boldly cut open the largest gourd.

STORIES OF THE BIRDS

But no jade green table and jewels came out.

Instead, there leaped out a crowd of dancers demanding money. There was no help for it. The miser had to pay out large sums from his savings to get rid of them.

He cut open another gourd and out came a procession of Buddhist priests, who at once began begging, and they were not easily got rid of, I can tell you.

Gourd after gourd was opened, for the greedy man always hoped that the next would bring him good luck and fortune, but every one was ill-fated and there came forth only the strangest people you can imagine, all clamouring for money and more money, until the old man was so poor that he had not a coin in the house. This was not all, for now there came out a giant who threatened to devour the man and his wife.

This was almost too much, but there was worse to come—a most awful odour, that made the old couple rush from the veranda holding their noses. This was their first good luck, for no sooner had they left the house than a gale of wind blew it as flat as a pancake, and a fire burned up all that was left.

So the man and his wife who had never been kind to birds or beasts, were now homeless and starving. They would quickly have died but for the charity of the kind neighbours, who took both into their house, and fed and clothed them as long as they lived.

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STORIES OF THE
BIRDS
FROM MYTH AND FABLE



M. C. CAREY

